SEED

CHARLES G. NORRIS

SEED

NOVELS BY CHARLES G. NORRIS

THE AMATEUR

SALT
OR THE EDUCATION OF GRIFFITH ADAMS

BRASS

BREAD

PIG IRON

ZELDA MARSH

SEED

SEED

A NOVEL OF BIRTH CONTROL BY
CHARLES G. NORRIS

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SEED

BEHOLD, *there went out a sower to sow:*

And it came to pass, as he sowed, some fell by the wayside, and the fowls of the air came and devoured it up.

And some fell on stony ground, where it had not much earth; and immediately it sprang up, because it had no depth of earth:

But when the sun was up, it was scorched; and because it had no root, it withered away.

And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up, and choked it, and it yielded no fruit.

And other fell on good ground, and did yield fruit that sprang up and increased; and brought forth, some thirty, and some sixty, and some an hundred.

—MARK: IV—3 TO 8

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SEED

BOOK I

1890

CHAPTER I

§ 1

A VEIL of mist, part haze, part land fog, lay motionless upon the floor of the Santa Clara Valley. The November sun shone brightly in a cloudless sky, but its warmth and rays pierced with difficulty the gray blanket that hugged the earth. Now and then, on easy rises along the dusty road that led from Guadalupe, one could see above the mist; it lay like a wide diaphanous scarf floating up against the steep mountain shoulders along the valley's eastern rim, on whose rugged sides the sun shone cleanly and warmly. Brush fires in half-stripped orchards, where pruned branches had been raked in heaps, added their lazy drifting smoke to the autumnal mist.

It made a peaceful California landscape, this orchard and cattle countryside that spread itself out in widening miles about the small town of Guadalupe. The village itself was half Mexican, half Californian, with one unpaved street which meandered aimlessly past the packing plant, the freight sheds close to the railroad track, past the station itself, on toward the rival General Stores opposite one another, past various saloons, billiard parlors, the Town Hall, the Catholic and Methodist Episcopalian churches, Miller's Hotel, the Guadalupe National Bank, Knowles' Undertaking Parlors, and the I. O. O. F. brick building. Shabby, dusty pepper trees at irregular intervals bordered this main thoroughfare, and beneath their shade in front of the hotel there usually stood a team or two of drowsing horses, harnessed to fringe-topped, dish-wheeled surreys, the animals haltered by ropes to the horizontal iron pipe that served as hitching post.

To-day, the sleepy indifference usually pervading the town was disturbed; there was a brisk air of something interesting afoot. A dozen rigs of various traditions and descriptions were ranged before the brick building whose second floor was occupied by the Odd Fellows Assembly Room, and it was here that the cause of the unwonted excitement might be located: the county election was in progress. Ranchers and ranch-hands from outlying districts, some of whom had driven more than thirty miles, had been making their appearance to vote in the I. O. O. F. building, all through the late afternoon. Sentiment was sharply divided between reëlecting Sheriff Ramiro Sanchez or elevating to the office Captain Dan Carter's candidate, Joe Cook, who had for a decade been blacksmithing in and about Guadalupe. The present incumbent, Captain Dan and his friends affirmed, was incompetent and unscrupulous; he had held the office too long, and had used it for his own purposes. More than that, there had been some cattle rustling going on—Philo Carter had found more than thirty head missing at his last round-up—and Captain Dan and his friends suspected that either the sheriff was making no particular effort to apprehend the depredators, or he was actually "in cahoots" with them. Ramiro Sanchez' supporters, on the other hand, claimed that whether or not their man was reëlected, Joe Cook, of impeccable reputation though he might be, was too old and too little versed in the ways of the world to make a satisfactory sheriff, and it was better to leave the situation as it was.

At either end of the room, upon raised platforms stood three tall-backed chairs, the center one large and imposing. Other ritualistic chairs were ranged about the walls, and into one corner had been shoved a dilapidated billiard table. Around another table, of plain redwood boards laid upon carpenter's horses, were grouped the clerks, tellers, and officials of the election, while between two curtainless windows stood the square ballot box, impressively padlocked.

Drifting clouds of cigarette and cigar smoke filled the room. On the billiard table in the corner sat a row of men in shirt sleeves, boots, and overalls, forearms on their knees, swinging their feet. A dozen curve-backed oaken armchairs were all occupied, and on the straight ones ranged against the wall, their hands shoved deep into the pockets of blue-jean trousers, or occupied with fingering the brown-paper cigarettes at their lips, sprawled half a score of idle watchers.

Toward four o'clock there was a stir. It began somewhere outside, perhaps just in front of the building, perhaps further down the street, but before the cause of the commotion had been identified, it had communicated itself to the overheated, crowded room. Everyone there knew simultaneously that Captain Dan Carter and his "gang" had arrived.

A minute or two later there came the thump of many feet upon the stairs, and the Captain entered noisily, followed by some dozen or more of his friends and relatives. Knowles, the undertaker, who was supervising the balloting, recognized in the group Dan's brother Stephen, his cousin Philo, and his brother-in-law Porter Farnsworth; the rest were foremen, a few bow-legged cowboys, and one or two ranch-hands.

§ 2

Captain Dan Carter was about forty-five—a stockily built man, square shouldered, with thick eyebrows, and a full gray mustache that curved over his mouth and curled up at the ends; his manner was quick, assertive, and domineering. In his left hand he carried a heavy cane, for his left leg was shorter than the right, the result of a bursting cannon at Chattanooga. Captain Dan—his title was one of courtesy—was a Southerner who had fought under the flag of the Confederacy, but when he came, adventuring, to California after the close of the war he had forgotten all about the South's differences with the North. Wandering from town to town, living a more or less hand-to-mouth existence, he had finally secured work at the quicksilver mines at Almaden near San José, and there the dark eyes and the white skin of Mathilda Crane had captured his fancy.

The girl was the only daughter of the Company's storekeeper, who lived in the hacienda at the foot of Mine Hill. Her parents were devout Catholics. For swaggering, impecunious Dan Carter, with his limp, his loud voice, and his godless ways, they had but a trifling regard; their daughter, however, had ideas of her own. Dan was not of her faith. He professed no religion, and she knew well her parents would never consent to her marrying him. So in the dark of a November night, Matty and her young lover dashed across the fields below the mines of Almaden to San José in a borrowed buggy and were made man and wife at the old Mission by a friendly priest, after Dan had promised to accept Catholicism and be baptized.

How deeply his convictions went in the matter of religion, Matty often wondered, though she was not profoundly concerned. In the beginning theirs had been a true mating with real love on either side, and neither had been critical. The first years had been hard years, with Mathilda alienated for all time from her parents, and Dan working here, there, and everywhere. The soil lured him, as it always had done, and through one vicissitude after another, drifting from town to town, the young couple, with their two small children, Francis and Camilla, had come to Guadalupe to settle finally a good fifteen miles to the south of the sleepy little town. There they had taken root and had bent their energies, first to the raising of cattle, then to hay and grain, in more recent years, to fruit.

It had been by no means an enviable history of work, love, and achievement. There had been dark intervals of discouragement, but the force of circumstances and their own natures had carried them forward. Dan Carter was a fighter—hard-headed, merciless, arrogant; his wife, at first deeply in love with him, had followed him blindly, accepting him without question as her fate. A more imaginative woman might have broken under the strain of so much endless housework and child-bearing, but Mathilda docilely persevered, living each day by itself.

Three hundred and twenty acres had first been acquired under the California homestead act, and a few years later, a six-hundred-and-forty-acre tract, known as the "Rincón de Romas" property, had fallen into the Captain's hands for a song. "Guadalupe Meadows," with its water rights and fine grazing lands, had followed, and the Captain had awakened one day to the realization that he was rated in the community as a man of wealth. The unsightly Carter house, with its additions, had come into being in much the same way, expanding along with his acreage and the increasing demands of a growing family.

For no less than nine children had been born to him and Mathilda in the twenty-five years of their marriage—two of them being twins. Time after time their whole venture had seemed on the brink of failure. Captain Dan had always been a hard drinker, and although they did not occur frequently, there were occasions when he imbibed more than he could hold, and at such times he became quarrelsome and uncontrollable. It was rumored he had once killed a negro with his fist, when the latter, rebellious over some order, had threatened him with a pickax.

Fifteen miles to the southward, close by La Canada Pass that led over the mountains to the hinterlands, lay the Carters' cattle ranch. Three twisted, python-limbed giant oaks which had invited the erection of a house beside them, gave the title "Los Robles" to the place. The Mexicans called it so, as did Mathilda, but Captain Dan was too vigorous and too vivid a personality to have any other than his own name applied to his property. To the countryside at large it was invariably "Captain Dan's ranch," "Captain Dan's cattle," "Captain Dan's fruit."

Across the road was the smaller ranch owned by his brother Stephen. Five years after Dan had established himself at Guadalupe, he had invited his brother and sister from Baltimore to visit him, and the result, shortly thereafter, had been their settling beside him in California: first, Stephen and his wife; later, Gertrude, who promptly married Porter Farnsworth of Gilroy. She and her husband acquired the Fitzhugh dairy ranch, a half mile or so east of the Carter brothers' properties. The last of the clan to join them was Philo, a Carter cousin also from Maryland, an adventurous, hard-living youth who by easy stages had drifted to California, hunted out his relatives, and found employment with Dan as foreman of his ranch. For three years he had ridden herd for the Captain, in turn had acquired a wife, a buxom Spanish beauty of Guadalupe, and was now working on lease a three-hundred-and-twenty-acre range which lay halfway up the bare mountain side, and touched one corner of the Farnsworth dairy tract.

A community of itself these Carters made with their children and employees. All of them had sons and daughters. Twenty-one in fact had been born of their marriages, ranging from Captain Dan's oldest son Francis, who was nineteen, to Stephen's two-year-old daughter May. The number of cow-punchers and ranch-hands varied with the seasons, but some of the foremen and their assistants remained year after year; a few of these too, were married and had children of their own. The intersection of the Guadalupe road which led upward to La Canada Pass, and the road which ran from Geronimo to the hills, marked the center of the Carter properties, and at this junction there had sprung into being an embryo village with a school, a small church, where once a month a visiting priest said Mass, a General Store and a few scattered dwellings. And although other families on neighboring ranches sent their small boys and girls to the school, attended services at the Catholic church on Sundays, and patronized the General Store, the cluster of buildings at the crossroads had come to be known as "Carterville."

§ 3

Teetering from side to side with the peculiar gait his shortened leg had given him, Captain Dan flung open the door and brusquely entered the hot, smoke-laden atmosphere of the Odd Fellows Assembly Room. From under the stiff brim of his broad felt hat, he swept its occupants with a quick, encompassing glance, greeting the crowd with a wave of his hand and a "Hello, everybody."

A murmur answered him, and Calvin Knowles acknowledged the salutation with an easy, "Howdy, Captain Dan."

Almost everybody in Guadalupe liked Dan Carter, whether or not he shared his political views. Better to say that his neighbors respected him, for mixed with the feeling of admiration was a very definite one of fear. Most of his acquaintances, even his wife, his brother, and the rest of the family, were, to some extent, afraid of him. He was too self-assertive, too loud voiced to be universally liked.

"Well, Cal, how's Joe coming along?" he demanded now of the undertaker. There was a good-natured twinkle in his eyes as he chose from the pile in which they were stacked, a long green ballot at the top of which was the imprint of a donkey's head.

"Guess he'll sure be elected," Knowles replied, with a squint to show he understood the Captain's raillery. "I ain't seen anybody round here to-day but what said he was sure goin' to vote for Joe."

The room silently appreciated the exchange; one or two men grinned.

After their names had been checked on the list of voters, the Captain and his companions, one by one, crossed the room to the padlocked box and dropped their ballots inside through a slit in its lid.

"On the level, now, Calvin," the Captain inquired, lowering his voice for the undertaker's ear, "you ain't got an inkling, have you, which way she's going?"

"I ain't got much doubt but what Cook'll get in," Knowles replied, matching his tone to Dan's. "Why, all hell, man, you got twelve to fifteen votes right there in your own crowd. With all them votes, and the way you're looked up to 'round here, you could come mighty nigh electing anybody you'd see fit."

Dan was pleased; he smiled under his large curving mustache and curled one corner of it with a thick, vigorous finger.

"Wish I could buy all you fellers a drink," he said to the room at large; "it's a ding shame they shut up 'lection day, but I reckon it's just as well." He sat down in an armchair someone had vacated and felt in his coat pocket for a bulky case from which he extracted a cigar. He offered the container to Stephen and to his cousin.

"Phil," he continued, as the latter helped himself, "if Sanchez gets elected, I'm going to run you for sheriff next time he's up for office."

Philo Carter was in his middle thirties—a spare, sinuous man with a skin burned almost black by the sun, for his days, from sunup to sundown, were spent in the saddle. His upper lip was graced with a thin strip of black mustache, his eyes were black, as was also his hair, which he wore long, almost to the nape of the neck. His aspect, with his dark skin and coloring, was forbidding. It was rumored he had been in a shooting scrape "back East," and was a fugitive from justice. To-day, however, he was a forceful, respected figure in the community, the Captain's right-hand man. Two absorbing interests filled his life: one, cattle—anything that had to do with them, roping, branding, breeding, herding; the other, his handsome, laughing Spanish wife, who had borne him three daughters, all curiously fair haired. A reckless, hot-tempered man in his way, a hard liver, a hard rider, a dead shot with rifle or revolver.

"I ain't particularly hankering after the job," he observed in answer to Captain Dan's remark.

"Well, something's got to be done about the way things 're bein' run round here."

"I don't like 'em much myself," Philo agreed.

"Too much cattle thieving going on," Captain Dan continued, "and, by dun, I got a gol-darned good notion who's doin' it, or at least winkin' at it."

A dead silence greeted his words. The murmur of voices, the shuffle of feet, the squeak of seats, and the scrape of chair-legs ceased; the room was swept clean of sound.

Without allowing his eyes to verify his suspicion, Captain Dan guessed Ramiro Sanchez had entered the room and had heard his last words.

He reached for a match, struck it, held the flame to the tip of his cigar, puffed it alight. Then, with unerring instinct, he turned his head slowly to bring his eye to meet the Mexican's scowling countenance.

Just within the doorway from the hall was a short railing in the center of which swung a small gate. Upon this railing Sanchez leaned, his sombrero pulled down over his eyes, his wrists encircled with studded leather cuffs, a blue silk handkerchief drooping from his neck. In the bright five-pointed star which dangled from his cowhide vest, Captain Dan saw the reflected gleam of his own match; saw too, in the holster at the man's hip, the long black-handled revolver.

The gaze of neither faltered; Ramiro's was frankly menacing, but nothing was betrayed in Dan's bland countenance.

"And who might that be, Captain Dan?" Sanchez drawled, breaking the strained silence in the room.

"Reckon you know yourself, Ramiro, 'bout as well as anybody round here," was the easy answer.

"Guess I'm in the dark, Captain Dan."

Despite the casualness with which they spoke, their words were charged with significance. Someone nervously coughed, and a chair scraped harshly upon the floor. Porter Farnsworth noted that the railing behind which the sheriff stood would be a great protection to him in case anyone should try to grapple with him. He noted too that Philo, who usually carried a gun, was to-day unfortunately without it. None of the others—the Captain or Stephen or any of their men—were armed, as far as he knew.

"Maybe Joe Cook'll round 'em up once he gets in," Captain Dan said with a smile.

"He ain't goin' to get in," the Mexican answered tersely.

Captain Dan rose and flecked a tiny bit of ash from his cigar.

"Reckon folks about here will decide that," he observed.

"Everybody voted?" he asked his men. "Let's get started, then."

Picking up his cane, settling his hat, he limped straight toward the rail that fenced the doorway, swung back the gate, pushed past the Mexican, and, opening the hall door, went on out into the corridor which gave directly upon the stairway to the street.

§ 4

A dusty surrey was waiting at the curb, its animals, tethered to one of the drooping peppers, restless and fidgety. Quieting them with a word, Captain Dan pulled himself up into the front seat and unwound the reins wrapped about the whip-stock.

"Unhitch 'em, will you, Steve?" he said to his brother as the latter emerged from the building.

Stephen undid the halter, stepped round to a side of the vehicle, and took the seat next the driver; Porter Farnsworth settled himself in the rear, and old Anthony Rodoni, Captain Dan's head herdsman, awkwardly climbed in and occupied the fourth seat. Rodoni was a seamed and weather-beaten Italian who had been in Dan's employ for over ten years, and to-day, because of a bruised leg, the result of a horse's fall, had been obliged to ride in the surrey.

There was a soft pounding of hooves, some plunging and circling, a few oaths, clouds of white, choking dust as Philo and the other cow-men swung themselves into their saddles and galloped off down the road. Captain Dan shifted his cigar to the other corner of his mouth, backed and wheeled his team, and started in the riders' wake.

"Reckon Sanchez was lookin' for a little trouble," Stephen observed when they were upon their way.

Stephen was five years younger than his brother Dan, a taller, lankier man, with "stick-up" hair, bad teeth, and a crooked nose. He was far less forceful than Dan—of wavering decision, uncertain judgment—and he leaned heavily upon his brother. No one knew better than himself how much he owed this arbiter of his destiny. His acres, his prosperity, even his complaining, devoted wife and her brood of children, were all the result of Dan's example and advice.

"He knows where he can get it," the Captain said, his teeth clenched upon his cigar, the taut reins wreathed about his strong hands as the half-broken colts, homeward bound, tried repeatedly to break.

"Sanchez is nothing but a greaser," Stephen continued; "he ain't no account, but he's liable to be troublesome if he ain't elected."

"Tell him to step round and pay us a visit . . . ."

"I don't think there was a gun in the outfit to-day, unless Philo had one——"

"He didn't," Porter from the back seat leaned forward to say. "I noticed he wasn't carrying one and asked him about it. He said he'd left it back home to be cleaned."

"It'd 've been 'ta-rah-rah-boom-de-ay' if Sanchez had taken it into his head to get nasty."

"Oh, come off, Steve: Ramiro's all talk and bluster. He totes a couple of six-shooters for show; he ain't never fired one of 'em off in his life!"

"That's foolish talk, Dan, an' you know it."

"I say again, if he wants trouble, he knows where he can get it."

"But that wouldn't do any good, Dan. What would happen to Matty and the kids if he took a pot shot at you some night? You gotter think of the rest of us, Dan. . . . . Why, we couldn't get anywheres with that canal by ourselves!"

He referred to an irrigating ditch in the digging of which both brothers were interested—a large undertaking that eventually would bring the waters from the springs of Guadalupe Meadows to their new orchards.

As they jounced and swayed in the racketing vehicle, they continued to discuss Sanchez, until Porter Farnsworth leaned forward again to interrupt:

"Say, Dan, 'r' you and Matty expecting us over Saturday night with all the youngsters?"

"Jumping Judas, that's right! Say, you're all coming?" Dan included Stephen in the question, and, as the latter nodded, he continued:

"By dun, I forgot about that, and Matty wanted me to be sure and remind you all. Say, Port, will you get word over to Philo sometime to-morrow? You might send one of the children over to tell Anna; we're sure expecting everybody next Saturday night. Matty said he was to get started by six on account of the small fry. Golly Mike, she's fixing up a dinner for about *thirty!*"

Captain Dan's voice indicated his pride, not only in his wife's capabilities, but in the prospect of so many of his own folk at the table.

The occasion, the approaching Saturday night, was the twenty-fifth anniversary of his marriage, the twenty-fifth anniversary of the night on which he had borrowed the shift-boss's buggy and had driven his young bride-to-be in mad flight to San José, where he stood beside her while the white-haired priest, in his gentle, benevolent voice, had married them.

He was thinking of that exciting ride as he drove homeward, the foam-flecked team before him straining at the leather reins. Twenty-five years married! Well, Matty was a good sort; she'd stood by him through all their ups and downs; she hadn't complained much, and she'd borne him a lot of healthy children. Not that he had ever wanted *nine* of them! But he couldn't say he wasn't glad he had 'em now, though off and on they'd caused him a peck of trouble.

There was Francis, for instance—Francis, his oldest boy, who was determined to become a priest! Why couldn't he have had a first-born like Philo, a man who had been a hard-riding, tough-going boy, one who knew how to handle cattle and *do* things? Francis, at fifteen, had resolutely made up his mind to take orders, and for the last four years had been at the Catholic Seminary in Saint Joseph, Missouri. Matty always had had a religious bent, and she made no secret of her satisfaction in having a son some day to be a priest. It had all been her doing—hers and Father Assanti's, who for a time had been in charge of the Guadalupe parish. Ever since his birth Francis had been more or less of an enigma to his father. He was the earnest, devote, dreamy sort, inclined to be delicate. Well, Dan said to himself, he wasn't wholly averse to having a son in the Church; perhaps it was a good thing for himself and the rest of them; but it didn't take the place of having a lad at home where he might have made a man out of him. . . . . If only Matty and the priests had let him alone!

One of the Captain's peculiarities was that he never swore, but at this moment, he felt he would have found satisfaction in an oath. The Catholic Church was all right; he supported it, acknowledged it. He'd put up three fourths of the money to build the church at the crossroads, and he usually accompanied Matty and the children when they went to Mass there, and sometimes even when they drove over to Guadalupe. But he didn't see why he had had to give up his eldest son to it!

His thoughts passed to his other children, the two older girls first, Camilla and Tilly, respectively eighteen and sixteen. Camilla was the smarter, more personable of the two; Tilly was too kittenish. There was something the matter with Tilly; she didn't seem to have any balance or dignity; she was forever giggling and wriggling like a fish. Dan often thought of having a doctor look her over.

After the girls came Josh; Captain Dan's own first name was Joshua. Josh was a good strong boy. He was a great reader, and he seemed to have plenty of ambition. Matty was always harping on sending him away to school. Well, when the boy was a bit older, Dan didn't care. It mustn't cost too much, that was all. He wanted all his children to have as good a start in life as he could give them.

Next came the twins, the thirteen-year-olds—Jack and Gill

—fine boys, both of them, who could ride anything that had four feet. Dan loved these two boys; year by year they were gaining in health and strength, and some day, he hoped, they'd be like his right and left hands. Jack was a bit too easy-going, perhaps, and Gill a trifle too scheming, but they were fine youngsters, and their father never failed to feel a thrill of pleasure when watching them in the saddle. Strongly built boys they were, with big shoulders, tough biceps, and firm round stout legs.

Following them came his favorite, Eva Ann, now just turned twelve, a round-eyed, soft-voiced child, loving and sweet. She often came to sit on the arm of Captain Dan's chair and slip her small brown arm along the back of it, her fingers touching his neck lightly. He loved to have her do so, and frequently said to himself that his whole life, its disappointments, failures, its struggles and whatever measure of success had come his way, were all worth while, if to him might be given some of the credit of bringing this glorious child into the world and giving her a right start in it. One thing only concerning her distressed him. She had something of her brother Francis' religious mania. Of Catholic rules and obligations she was a passionate observer, and it disturbed her father to notice how distressed she became if any of these were disregarded by the rest of the family. Captain Dan was glad she was pious, but a secret fear haunted him that she might some day want to enter a convent. Years before, when Matty had placed her for a term with the Sisters in San José, there had been some talk of it, but then and there Captain Dan had put his foot down and forbidden the subject ever to be mentioned again. He made it very clear to Matty just how he stood, and the matter had never been alluded to since in his presence, but he suspected that Eva Ann and her mother sometimes whispered about the plan and prayed for its success.

The two remaining children were the nine-year-old Bart—freckled, noisy and obstreperous—and the little girl, Trudie, who was seven.

A handsome family, when one came to consider it. A feeling of satisfaction filled Captain Dan as he drove homeward, thinking of his wife and their brood—nine well born children, healthy boys and girls who would grow up and some day have children of their own. He had pride, too, in the thought that he was head of the Carter clan—his brother and his cousin with their wives, his sister with her husband. Stephen had five youngsters of his own coming along; Gertrude had four, and Philo, with his buxom, dark-eyed wife, three. They all turned to him for advice and leadership. He felt the responsibility, felt that it had changed him in many ways. Looking back on the harum-scarum days of his youth, the early years of his married life, the casual way in which his first two babies had been born, the memory brought no pleasure. Twenty-five years ago! Well, in the last fifteen or sixteen of them, something had been accomplished. These relatives of his had gathered about him with their families, they had made homes near his, had brought children into the world aping his and Matty's example; they had cast their lot in with him, and, to a considerable extent, one and all had prospered. A good deal of it had been a hand-to-mouth existence, but better times were ahead. They were all Carters, he reminded himself—Carters of Baltimore. And there were the beginnings of a little town, bearing their name, which had sprung up at their very feet, to attest that they, the Carters, had already made a mark in the world.

CHAPTER II

§ 1

The team pounded hollowly across the gray, dust-covered bridge, the surrey rattling and bouncing across it. Captain Dan drew his steaming animals to a halt before the high porch of the small General Store of which diminutive Carterville boasted. Porter left him there, promising to let Philo know about the coming Saturday night, and walked a couple of hundred yards on up the road to his own gate. Porter's two small daughters met him as he opened it, the older one clutching him about the knees, the younger lifting her face to be kissed.

A boy came out of the store's doorway above Dan's head, carrying a five-gallon can of kerosene, which with some effort he bore to the edge of the porch and set down beside its railing. The Captain recognized his son Josh.

"Moth' sent me over for coal-oil, Pa; got room for it?"

His father motioned to the seat Porter had vacated.

"Give you a lift over," he offered.

"Can't; Tony's with me."

From the shadow behind him, there emerged a handsome dark boy about Josh's age—Anthony Rodoni's son. He looked older than Josh, for he wore all the accouterments of the professional cow-puncher, sugar-loafed sombrero, gaudy handkerchief, faded blue jeans, high-heeled boots, and jingling wheel spurs. He was a good-looking youth, clear-skinned, dark-eyed, dark-browed.

His father, from the back seat of the surrey, addressed him sharply in Italian.

Without replying, the boy held up a freshly bandaged hand and wrist.

"He got thrown," Josh explained. "Pony was gored while they were branding over in 'A' section; one of the steers bolted, and Tony went over the fence. Mother fixed him up," he went on; "she sent him over to give me a heft with this. His palm's full of splinters, that's all. . . . . The pump's broken down," he finished irrelevantly.

Captain Dan eyed his son from under his hat's stiff brim.

"Whatchoodo?" he demanded.

"Got Al." Al Tucker was one of Stephen's men, handy at mending broken machinery. Captain Dan nodded.

"Did he fix it?" he demanded.

"Dunno."

Another moment's pause; then the Captain inquired for mail.

"Get in," he ordered his son, and, directing the other boy to hang on, turned his horses' heads toward the lower road. Leaving his brother Stephen at the entrance to his own ranch, he drove a little farther on, into the driveway, flanked by two square white-painted wooden posts, which marked the portals of Los Robles.

The entrance was usually barred by a wide gate which could be opened by the wheel of an approaching vehicle bending flat to the ground an upright iron staple which operated like a hinge at one side of the road. To-day, however, the gate was half open, and upon its top rail, straddling it and talking to himself, was Dan's youngest son, the nine-year-old Bart, who was amusing himself by vigorously kicking the gate open and shut.

The Captain reined in his impatient colts with a wrench of the reins.

"Bart!"

At his father's sudden angry voice, the small boy precipitously fell off his perch to the ground, and the gate, freed of its burden, slowly closed.

"By dun!" the Captain roared in exasperation. "Josh, open that gate. . . . . By dun," he repeated, guiding his skittish horses through the passageway, "I've told that boy a dozen times to keep off of that." He pulled the team to a standstill and addressed himself to the offending youngster.

"Ain't I told you to keep off that gate?"

Bart picked himself out of the gravel to stand erect and attentive, looking up into his father's angry face, his high color betraying, despite freckles and tan, the fear that chilled him.

"I swan I'll lick the tar out of you brats if I catch any of you swinging on that gate ag'in." As the Captain spoke, he recalled that the last transgressor had been his favorite, Jack.

"Don't you know you'll get it out of order if you swing on it that way?"

Bart, wide-eyed, returned his father's scowl.

"By dun," the Captain said again, and, easing the reins, he allowed the team to plunge forward toward their much desired stables.

The surrey swept around the driveway that circled the tree-studded lawn, turned off just before reaching the house, careened sharply at the corner of a structure that housed the water tank, plunged into velvety dust, and came to a stop before the wide doorway of the great whitewashed barn. Two men came running out and caught the plunging horses' bits. A strong aromatic odor of dry hay and hot animals, and the dull heavy sound of restless hooves in stalls came from the dark interior.

One hand upon an iron stanchion supporting the surrey's top, his cane in the other, Captain Dan leaped from his seat, and limped off vigorously in the direction of the house.

§ 2

The haze had lifted a little from the valley's floor; over to the west the sun, well down toward the line of hills, was setting in an aura of clear pale yellow light. The half-naked fruit trees were dappled with red and yellow leaves, a few here and there still retaining their summer green. Their shadows, upon the soft warm loam beneath them, lay in parallels like ranks of sentinels, and the peaked roofs of barns and outbuildings threw dark sharp-angled patterns upon white roads and fields. To the east the Carter ranch stretched in an unbroken flat toward the steep line of La Canada Heights which shone yellow in the rays of the descending sun. Far off, a cart, bulging over with a great load of hay, its driver standing erect upon the seat, was slowly weaving its way along the dusty road, homeward bound toward the great barn. A little to the left, a lone rider could be descried, and further off a column of smoke rose perpendicularly into the motionless evening air attesting to other life that moved and breathed out there toward the mountains. Near at hand, fences enclosed bare and empty dung-covered corrals, fields of pyramided corn stalks, and trampled, wilting tomato patches, the plants long stripped of their fruit. Beyond these, unhampered by barriers of any kind, roamed the restless herds of cattle.

To the rear of the main house, a line of tall eucalyptus trees stood with drooping leaves and long strips of yellow peeling bark, a stalwart row of ragged guardians separating the home site from the ranch. Beneath their branches, there huddled a group of whitewashed cabins. Here lived Anthony Rodoni with his family, and Captain Dan's head foreman, the Mexican Martinez, who also had a wife and children. Next to those cottages, a low shed-like building was given over to the vaqueros—Joe, Pete, Jesus, and Tomas—and sometimes to one or two more cow-men, when the work was heavy. Last in the line was the cook-house over which presided old Tom Sing, the gray, pigtailed Chinaman who for many years had fed the Carter hungry ranch-hands. Tom Sing was very much of an aristocrat and would have nothing to do with his own countrymen, who inhabited what was known as "Chinese Camp," standing by the willows along the banks of Guadalupe Creek. Here a dozen, more or less, slanting-eyed, yellow-faced Mongolians lived darkly, and upon their mysterious privacy neither Jack nor Gill, least of all, Bart, dared not spy. The "chinks" lived in squalor, and a peculiar stench, the combined odor of joss sticks, dirt, and strange cooking clung to the spot like a miasma. Silently, unobtrusively, these coolies came and went; no one was ever able to identify one from another; they were hired, fired, and ruled by a weazened, wrinkled tyrant of their own race, Luey-Nuey. Under his supervision proceeded the work of planting and hoeing the long rows of tomatoes, the pruning of trees, the picking of fruit, the stacking of stalks, the baling of hay, and the sewing up the mouths of grain sacks when the great, clattering threshing machine dumped the full bags upon the ground.

The Carter house was a yellow, straggling homestead that had spread out haphazardly in various enlargements and additions encroaching upon the area in the rear and at the sides. Dan and his wife had hardly lived in it a year before its original eight rooms were found to be too small for their needs. First the kitchen was increased in size, then a room added to accommodate the twins so that their quarters might be turned into a nursery for the new baby. Two years later, when Trudie was born, another room was required for Camilla and Tilly, and presently the dining room had to be extended in order that the big family might gather about one table. More space had been necessary for additional domestics, a new laundry had to be built, and there had been need for a storeroom and a bigger pantry, the attic had been "finished off." The house, as originally erected, had been particularly ugly, with a bulging front veranda, balancing square bay windows, surmounted with ornamental millwork scrollings, a steep roof, with sharp angled gables jutting out before and behind a single window in the center of each. But the various additions had rather softened its harsh lines, making it look "homey," comfortable. Always it appeared shabby. The depredations of small hands and feet had left upon it many scars.

The veranda was its most attractive spot. Olaf, the redbearded, silent Scandinavian, who attended to the lawn and garden when not otherwise employed, kept a number of potted plants at one end of it, and there, too, a monstrous mattress vine climbed thickly to the roof and provided an impenetrable screen. Behind its protection, Camilla and Tilly had strung a hammock, spread rugs upon the floor, arranged a table and some frayed wicker chairs. Here in the evenings, or on hot afternoons, some members of the family were usually to be found. The veranda corner was far more comfortable than the set stiffness of the parlor with its starched Nottingham lace window curtains and plush-upholstered furniture.

On either side the house stood the limb-twisted oaks that had given the Carter place its name: two to the north, and one magnificent giant at the south. The oval-shaped, ill-kept lawn was spotted here and there with a variety of trees. Matty herself had set these out even before the building of the house. She remembered the gracious foliage that had surrounded the hacienda in her youth, and now here were a fine magnolia, a tall English holly, some shapely firs, a dusty cypress, and almost in the very center of the grass plot a curious species known to the family as "the monkey tree." It had long, evil-looking, hairy branches that seemed to be reaching out to seize an unwary passer-by in a malevolent embrace. Bart had an actual fear of this tree, and avoided it.

§ 3

Stretched flat upon one of the worn rugs that covered the veranda floor, her chin cupped in two hands, her thin stockinged legs waving idly back and forth above her head, Eva Ann was reading *The Wide, Wide World* in the last of the fading daylight. As she heard the crunching sound of her father's lame foot on the graveled driveway, she hastily closed the book and ran to meet him, flinging her small pipe-stem arms about him.

"Why, honey, honey—hello, honey," said Captain Dan, smoothing her silky straight brown hair; "what's up? Anything gone wrong?"

He often asked her such questions. Smiling up at him, she shook her head. As he fondly returned her look, he wished he had thought to buy her as usual "a little something" in town. He fished in his waistcoat pocket to bring out a white peppermint lozenge and presented it.

"Where's your Mama, honey?"

"I don't know, Papa; maybe she's upstairs."

"I have to see about the pump; reckon something's gone wrong with the gas engine; it's broke down, Josh says, and we won't have any water in the house to-morrow unless it's fixed. Maybe I'll be late for supper."

"I'll tell her." With the words, the child was halfway up the steps. She was always like that, thought her father—ever anxious to be of service. He stayed her with a quick gesture as through the glass pane of the front door he saw his wife approaching. Matty opened it and came out.

"Oh, here you are," she said to Dan. "Back already, hey? How's the election going?"

Mathilda Carter was now a heavy, corpulent woman of forty-two or -three. To an extraordinary degree she possessed an even-tempered, imperturbable disposition. Often, when Dan was most annoyed with her, he told himself her serenity was no more than cow-like stupidity. Nothing ever seemed to agitate Mathilda. Once she had been a comely girl with dark eyes and creamy skin, but beauty had long since deserted her. Now, she bulged in front and had grown so wide of hip that her walk was slow and ponderous. A thick cushion of fat lay between her shoulder blades at the nape of her neck, and flabby bags of flesh swung to and fro from the underside of her fat arms. Across her high, smooth forehead she wore a "false front," a band of tight brown curls, which she fastened to her real hair with invisible hairpins. But hers was by no means an unpleasing face. It had a fine quality of dignity, and behind its placid mask were definite lines of character. Mathilda was very much of a woman, and one who asked nothing for herself. Her only concern was for her religion and her children. Heaven alone knew what she had hoped, of what she had dreamed, and to what she had aspired when in the dead of that November night she had fled with her swaggering young lover to be married. Long, long ago, that Mathilda had departed, and some other entity, wholly different, had come to take her place: Mathilda Crane had never been considered placid: Mathilda Carter suggested little else.

Her husband sometimes wondered what she thought of himself. He was never quite sure. Her feelings were, as a matter of fact, curiously mixed. There were occasions when she felt genuine tenderness for him, particularly when he was tired or overworked, but too frequently the emotion he awakened in her verged closely upon dislike. She was afraid of him. She had schooled herself not to betray it, but she shrank from his violent rages and his irritable reprimands of the children. She was willing to resort to almost any subterfuge so that he might not be provoked. This accounted for her appearance of placidity; she never answered him when he railed at her; never answered at all if she could help it. There were times when she knew that no matter what she said, it annoyed him.

§ 4

Thus it was on this particular evening. Her mild, characteristically "sweet" greeting, her perfunctory questions, her pretense of interest where he was certain none existed, irritated Captain Dan. She knew perfectly well, he said to himself, he was home much later than he had said he'd be; and about the election? He was sure she hadn't the faintest interest in it, nor possessed an inkling of what it was all about. He said nothing, however. Kissing her warm, fat cheek, he went on into the house, telling her not to wait supper for him, but to put the coffeepot on the back of the kitchen stove so he might help himself when he came in.

As he started to climb the stair, Camilla and Tilly appeared at its top. Seeing him, they drew back, Tilly nervously giggling.

"Evening, girls," Dan said, pulling himself upward with a strong hand on the balustrade.

In passing, he gave to each a quick scrutiny in the dim light of the upper hallway. Camilla seemed sweet and attractive with her dark hair and eyes. At her throat, she wore a pretty oval miniature, a locket, suspended by a fine gold chain; it made her slim, white neck look round and soft. Tilly, with her crimped "frizz" and her fluttering eyelids, squirmed convulsively as he came near, and hugged her sister's side.

"Darned fool," thought Captain Dan, striding to his and Matty's room to divest himself of his town suit. He hated these particular clothes. The coat and vest bound his body like bands across shoulders and chest. He jerked them off with energy, kicked them to the floor, and slipped on his worn, dusty corduroys, lacing the loose trouser ends into his half-boots with a feeling of satisfaction.

§ 5

His cane hooked about his wrist, he presently limped energetically from the room. When he was at home he did not wear a coat, and his vest always hung unbuttoned, the heavy links of a watch chain across his chest keeping its flaps together. Descending the back stairs to the kitchen, which was full of roasting smells and sizzling sounds, as Matea, the cook, hurried final preparations for the evening meal, he went out by the rear entrance, slamming back the outer screen door with a loud bang as he passed through. In the area immediately behind the house, he paused and peered up through the gathering dusk, at the gage on the tank which marked the water level. He could just make it out, and saw what he feared, that the tank was almost empty. Just before leaving for Guadalupe, he had ordered Martinez to start filling it. The pump was operated by one of the first gas engines brought to California, and burned distillate, which arrived from San Francisco in great iron barrels. Captain Dan had become familiar with this new form of motive power at the Almaden mines, and some years later had sent to the Glasgow manufacturers for an engine to use at Los Robles. When it arrived, he had been inordinately proud of it.

The absence of any sound of plunging water within the tank told him the pump was not operating, and so, with hurried step, he set off in the direction of the well-house, his face darkening.

"By dun—by dun," he kept repeating, in an exasperated whisper.

A hundred yards or so beyond the Chinese camp, not far from the edge of the creek, lay the well-house. The well itself was some hundred and forty feet deep and had two lateral tunnels; it supplied all the water for the family, the garden, and was used for watering the animals in the stables and near-by corrals. Both gas engine and pump were enclosed in a small wooden shed about a dozen feet square.

It was almost dark when he reached the spot, and within the shed there was no light of any kind. The building was deserted. Groping his way inside, Dan's foot struck a heavy piece of iron. He would have fallen had he not saved himself by a quick reach for the wall. Clenching his jaws to ease the sharp pain, he struck a match and held it above his head, peering about him in the light of its wavering flame. The dismantled engine lay at his feet, various parts scattered upon the ground. As the flame died away, a growl more like a beast's than a man's, sounded in the Captain's throat. The fact that whoever had been tinkering with the machinery—Al Tucker or some other—had left the job in such a condition merely because quitting time had arrived sent the hot blood beating to Dan's head. He and his household, his barns, and his stock should have no water, should they, just so some lazy ranch-hand might have his supper and his night's rest? Well, he'd see about that!

The darkness handicapped him. He wished for his horse, but now he was too impatient to retrace his steps. Scrambling down one steep side of the creek, with difficulty climbing the other, he set off over the rough, clodded orchard toward Stephen's home.

§ 6

His brother and family were already at supper. As the Captain limped up the brick walk from the gate, he could see them through the window and half-glassed door of the dining room, Stephen at one end of the table, his wife, Lizzie, opposite, their two sons, Frank and George, to his right, little Jimmy, Lottie, and May facing them. Lizzie was ladling out the soup from a tureen and passing plates.

He was in no mood to appreciate the domesticity of the scene. Stumping across the wooden porch, he brusquely opened the porch door to the dining room.

"'Lo folks; howdy, Liz. Excuse me, won't you? Want to see Steve a minute. Come out here, will you?"

His brother pushed back his chair and rose at once. The children stared with alarm at the sudden apparition of their uncle. Their absence of greeting deepened the Captain's pique. Lizzie hospitably murmured something about his "having a bite," but Dan waved her silent. Lizzie was one of those talkative, complaining women who always irritated him.

When he and his brother were outside, the door closed, Dan began:

"Where's Al, Steve? S'pose I can find him? He ain't gone to town yet, has he? I want to speak to him about that gas engine; he's been tinkering with it this afternoon and's gone off and left it scattered all over creation."

As he spoke, the two mechanically turned, crossed the porch, descended the steps, and moved off in the direction of the cabins where Stephen's ranch-hands were quartered.

"By dun, I don't understand that, Steve—Al's going off that way and leaving the dum thing strood all over the place. Means no water to-morrow: none for ourselves and none for the stock. I can't understand his going off that way and leavin' things lyin' round just because it got dark. Makes me pretty hot in the collar, Steve. I can't understand his doing it . . . ."

The sound of men's voices and laughter guided them to the cook-house from whose curtainless windows the warm, yellow light of lamps gushed out into the night. In response to Stephen's call, Al Tucker appeared at the door.

He was a slow-witted fellow in spite of his mechanical aptitude, and it took him a minute or two to reply to Dan's sharp interrogations.

"Well, Captain, 'tain't no fault of mine," he said, wagging his head; "I'd 've stayed till sunup working on her, if it 'd been any use. 'Twarn't none. Piston rings and main bearing's all burnt out. You've got to send to 'Frisco for some new parts, an' I'm a-thinkin' maybe you won't get 'em. Ain't I right that thar machine come from England?"

"Yes, yes; I don't understand. What's happened?"

"Well, sir, you know the piston rings inside a cylinder, and you know whar the main bearing's located? Well, sir, they ain't any more; they're done for. You've got to get new ones if you ever expect that thar engine to run again. There warn't a speck of oil nor grease in her."

"What's that?"

"What I'm telling you, Captain. There warn't as much as a teaspoon of oil inside the cylinder when I got the head off, and the grease cup that feeds the main bearing was as dry as Mohave."

"You sure of that, Al?" There was an ominous note in the Captain's question.

"Yes sir-ee, just as sure as I'm here talking to you."

There followed a moment's silence as the three men stood facing one another in the half light that reached them from the cook-house, also in dead silence as the men within cocked their ears to the sharp murmur of the altercation. Distinctly they heard the Captain's:

"So *that's* it, hey?"

"Yes, sir, sure as I'm here talking to you." Another pause, and presently:

"Well, thanks, Al. Be over in the morning soon as you're fed. I'll get you up to 'Frisco somehow. We'll have those parts down here by to-morrow if you have to lug 'em yourself."

"I reckon I've got to have it out with Martinez to-night," Dan said to his brother as they walked toward the road.

"I've told that greaser forty-eleven times 'bout keeping that engine and pump oiled and greased. . . . . By dun, Steve, that's going to cost me a pretty penny, and I need all I c'n lay my hands on these days. If we have to send clear to Glasgow for new parts . . . . ! That old windmill's no good; it'll never lift the water to the tank's height now."

Stephen realized his brother was in for one of his mad rages. Loyal and devoted as he was, he shared people's distaste of the Captain's anger. He hesitated now, as they reached the roadside, whether or not to go along with him and try to dissuade him from doing anything immediately about the matter.

"Maybe Marty's not to blame," he hinted.

Dan turned on him.

"I suppose," he said, angrily, "I suppose it's me that should go out there and see that the pump an' engine's properly oiled? By dun, Steve, you're a fool."

He limped off down the dusty road without another glance or word. The radiance of a filling moon, long risen in the sky, had begun to make itself evident; the mist that had half clouded the valley all day had disappeared. In the white moonlight, Stephen watched his brother's swaying shoulders going down the road, and he drew a deep breath of regret. Dan would get himself into trouble one of these days. That disposition of his . . . . He liked to quarrel too well. . . . . Martinez was a greaser!

§ 7

Some ten minutes later, the Captain caught sight of a boyish figure seated upon the stoop of one of the whitewashed cottages beneath his own tall eucalyptus trees. The moon was sufficiently strong for him to distinguish the bandaged hand and wrist.

"Come here, you Tony!"

The lithe figure of Anthony Rodoni's son was at once beside him.

"Where's Martinez?" demanded Captain Dan. " 'Ze home? You know where he is? . . . . Go find him."

While he waited, he beat the edge of his boot with the tip of his cane. In a few moments, he made out the big Mexican lumbering toward him out of the tree shadows.

Dan's first questions were low-pitched, almost ingratiating in tone.

"How'd it happen, Marty? I thought you was goin' to see the engine was properly oiled and greased 'fore you started her; I thought you was goin' to see the pump was looked out for. How'd it happen, Marty? By dun, I thought I'd made myself clear, Marty. . . . . How'd it happen? . . . . Got any idea?"

Martinez could find no voice to answer him. His silence Dan interpreted as stupidity or surliness, and it drove the pounding blood in his temples to an even more furious beat. A deep guttural rumble sounded in the Captain's throat, and suddenly, by some animal instinct that warned him, the foreman felt his danger. Dan never knew whether Marty started to make a quick reach for the long-bladed hunting knife at his belt, or to take to his heels. The swift blow of the Captain's cane nailed him where he stood. The big man went down like a bag of loose meal, doubling in the middle, venting a falsetto shriek. Twice more the Captain struck, then kicked the prostrate figure with his heavy boot. Breathing a trifle heavily, he turned away, felt the lower part of his stick with investigating fingers, wiped them on the seat of his corduroys, and limped toward the house.

The family was still at table when he entered, Camilla and Tilly busily putting away dishes and brushing off crumbs from the red-fringed tablecloth. Matty was stirring the last of her tea, holding in an affectionate clasp the small fingers of Trudie who sat at her left. The four boys had their heads together over a match trick, and Eva Ann shielded her eyes from the rays of the lamp, as she bent over the pages of *The Wide, Wide World.*

At first none heard his step, but now the boys looked up with pleased looks in their eyes, and while Tilly hastened to pull back her father's chair, Camilla hurried to the kitchen for his coffee and supper. Eva Ann, closing her book, shyly came round to stand beside him, and Matty said cheerfully, with a smile:

"Nice to have you back early, Dan; afraid you might be kept longer. . . . . What was it, the pump?"

He nodded generally, and reaching for the whisky bottle which stood at his place, poured from it a straight two fingers into his tumbler, drinking it off with closed eyes. Expectantly they waited for him to speak. He had been pleased by their welcome—so different from Stephen's surly crew. He eased himself in his chair and curled the end of his mustache with a forefinger.

"Trouble," he announced, looking round, "lots of it. There won't be any water in this house to-morrow; you boys will have to fetch pails in from the horse trough in the morning. Get along as best you can until the pump's fixed. Perhaps we'll have water by Thursday. Hope so, 'tenny rate."

"Oh, but, Dan, how about the party Saturday night? I'll have to be cooking all day Friday."

"Got to do the best you can," the Captain repeated. There was no further comment. Matty's placid face indulged in one of its rare frowns; Tilly nervously giggled. Camilla appeared with her father's hot supper and the granite coffeepot.

Dispassionately, the Captain told them about the neglected pump and engine. He said nothing of his recent encounter. Josh ventured a question, and then the boys, with lowered voices, returned to their problem of the matches, while Camilla and her sister cleared the table, and Matty, her youngest child's hand still clasped in one of hers, helped herself to a fresh cup of tea. Eva Ann gently perched on an arm of the Captain's chair, and laid her arm across its back so as not to disturb him as he ate.

"What do you think of this child here, Papa?" Matty said affectionately, squeezing the soft fingers she held in hers; "five straight A's on her report card."

"Well, that's fine, now; good girl, Trudie," the Captain approved.

"Same time," Matty continued, "I don't like that Miss Street. I don't think she ought to talk to the children about the Bible. She's not qualified to give religious instruction. Wish you'd speak to Porter about that; if he's Chairman of the School Board, he ought to do something about it."

"More coffee, Papa? There's a piece of apple pie"—solicitously from Camilla.

"Pa," Jack broke in, "Marty told me to-day they're shipping up some longhorns from Texas. 'Zat right?"

"Will they route 'em to Gilroy or San José?" Gill asked.

"If they're comin', c'n we go with Marty and help drive 'em over?"

The questions came in a rush, but before the Captain could answer there was a noisy explosion from Bart.

"Say," the small boy burst out, intent upon the matches spread before him, "you can't do that! Don't you see if you do you'll never get one to go with the one at the end?"

The loud young voice brought a quick frown to the Captain's brow. It was but momentary. He was fed now and enjoying more whisky, this time diluted with water. Eva Ann slipped her arm to his shoulder. He sighed contentedly, lit a cigar, eased back comfortably, and, in a moment or two, felt the gentle caress of her fairy fingers on his neck.

"Well, Mrs. C., 're you all ready for Saturday night?"

"Yes, I think so. Counting noses, there'll be twenty-nine of us. We can seat eighteen 'round this table by crowding a little, and I thought I'd put the eleven youngsters at another I've arranged with Olaf to fix for me in the parlor. . . . . But, Dan, I don't know how I shall manage without water!"

"Don't worry. You'll have water all right."

"Well, I hope so. . . . . Now, let's see," Matty continued, fixing her eyes on the ceiling and checking off the number of children on her fingers, "there're our own youngest three—I thought I'd include Eva Ann in that group, she'll sort of run things for them. Stephen's Jim, Lottie, and May make six. Then there's Porter's and Gertrude's Felix, Ada, and Dora, and Philo's and Anna's Jane and Peggy. I didn't know about Josephine. She's twelve, and I thought she might sit with the grown-ups. You wouldn't mind that would you, Eva Ann?"

"Oh, no, Mama."

"Well, then, that's eleven, and I thought I'd just have a cold supper for them, cold chicken, maybe, so we wouldn't have so much passing, and plenty of sandwiches and candy. They'll carry out their own dishes, and Eva Ann, perhaps Bart too and one of the other boys, can bring in the ice cream——"

"Oh, gee, Ma, 're we going to have ice cream? When you going to make it? C'n I lick the paddle?"

"Bart!"

"Sorry, Pa."

"—and then I thought I'd serve claret punch for the women —you men can have your whisky—and cider for the small children."

"Sounds nice."

"Oh, Papa, will you have to make a speech?" The question bubbled up out of Tilly like escaping gas. Immediately she giggled miserably in embarrassment.

Ignoring her, her father turned his attention to Josh.

"When you grow tired of that nonsense, Josh, wish you'd step over to Rodoni's house and tell him I want to see him. He's going to be foreman round here from now on."

All four boys' heads came up with a quick look of surprise, and the eyes of Matty, Camilla, even Tilly, sought the Captain's face questioningly. There was a moment's silence, then Josh found the courage to ask what was in all minds.

"What's going to happen to Martinez?"

"He's quitting; leaving to-morrow."

Another silence; one or two glanced at each other, and Josh, his interest in the match trick at an end, rose to obey his father's command. Martinez for twelve years had been connected with Los Robles; his going affected them all, but none dared inquire further into the whys and wherefores. The head of the house, they knew, kept his own counsel and shared it only when so minded.

The work of clearing the table proceeded at an accelerated pace, Matty herself lending a hand; the boys were relegated to other quarters. Eva Ann took Trudie to bed. The Captain, in the meantime, strolled to the veranda, his hands thrust deep into his trousers' pockets, the cigar firmly planted between his teeth.

The night was beautiful. Lawn and shrubs had all turned silvery in the moon's white light, and beneath the trees lay silhouetted sharp black shadows of elfish shape. From beds close by the steps, where in a sheltered corner a mass of mignonette languished in an unkempt tangle, rose their soft fragrance scenting the night delicately. Far off in the direction of the hills toward La Canada Pass, came the excited yapping of coyotes.

THE CARTER FAMILY in 1890

- CAPTAIN DAN CARTER—MATHILDA
  - Francis (19)
  - Camilla (18)
  - Tilly (16)
  - Josh (14)
  - Jack } twins (13)
  - Gill }
  - Eva Ann (12)
  - Bart (9)
  - Trudie (7)
- STEPHEN CARTER—LIZZIE (*Captain Dan's brother*)
  - George (12)
  - Frank (10)
  - Jim (8)
  - Lottie (5)
  - May (2)
- PORTER FARNSWORTH—GERTRUDE (*Captain Dan's sister*)
  - Charley (10)
  - Felix (8)
  - Ada (5)
  - Dora (3)
- PHILO CARTER—ANNA (*Captain Dan's cousin*)
  - Josephine (12)
  - Jane (8)
  - Peggy (5)

CHAPTER III

§ 1

"By dun," the Captain exclaimed with exasperation, wrenching at the white starched collar he was striving to fasten about his neck. He and Matty were dressing for the family dinner party that was to celebrate their twenty-fifth anniversary. Matty, ably assisted by Camilla and Tilly, had been bustling all day with preparations. The house was in order, the tables set, the dinner well under way. She had come upstairs fifteen minutes before, to put on her gray striped challis and to pin on a fresh "frizz."

Through the mirror of the dresser before her she glanced at her husband, wondering if he was in one of his cross moods. At the moment, the buttoning was completed, and she saw him run a forefinger between the stiff linen and his neck, settling the hated collar in place. She knew he loathed "dressing up." It was a relief to her, therefore, when having fastened his flat made-up tie about his neck he patted it with approval and said in a pleasant conversational tone:

"You know, Matty, old girl, I kinda like these big parties. Wish we had more folks in than we do."

"They're n't any we could ask outside the family—leastwise, not round here."

The Captain considered.

"I don't know as I'd want 'em. The family suits me. I've been feeling pretty good all day, thinking about to-night."

"I don't mind the work," Matty stated, screwing into place with her finger tips a rebellious spiral of brown curls.

For the moment, the Captain made no further comment. He buttoned the binding vest across his broad chest and stiff shirt front. Then he peered at himself, bringing his face close to his reflection, smoothing out his flowing mustache with a curling motion of his forefinger.

"Twenty-five years . . . ." he observed.

He continued to study his reflection, but his mind was upon what this day meant to him—to him and to his wife. He had never anticipated, when he had helped the creamy-skinned, dark-eyed Mathilda Crane into the shift boss's buggy, that she and he might be man and wife for twenty-five years. The thought of it made him feel old, but he was far from old, and knew it. His best years, constructive ones, were ahead of him. The past had been hardly more than a preparation for the future, and yet, he and that same Mathilda Crane had already accomplished a good deal. There rose up in him a warm feeling of pride. They two, his wife and himself, had this straggling, generously proportioned house, the twelve-hundred-acre ranch, two thousand head on the range, the orchards which were planted and would some day bear tons of fruit, and nine healthy, strong children. His brother, sister, cousin, and their children, lived in the town that bore his name. All this was the result of work, energy, driving power, his and Matty's. Good old Matty, she'd done her share, she'd borne the children, and she'd worked like a plow horse. He didn't mind her bulkiness nor her crimps. She was a good sort, after all, and she'd stuck by him pretty faithfully and pretty satisfactorily for twenty-five years! An affectionate thought of her came to him; he hesitated, then went toward her to lay a hand on her plump shoulder.

"Quarter of a century, hey, old girl?"

She glanced up at his face in her mirror with eyes that widened a little. What she saw there disturbed her even more than his demonstration of affection. Alarm of him filled her.

"Quarter of a century," Dan repeated. "It's quite a time. . . . . Reckon we got a lot to be proud of."

To her surprise, she found herself trembling, and as she laid down her comb her hand shook so that the implement rattled on the marble slab. She felt an impulsive pressure of her husband's fingers upon her shoulder, and in the glass his eyes met hers. They held each other's glance for a moment and then he smiled. It was as if his rough fingers had clutched her heart rather than her shoulder.

"Good old girl," he said gently, "good old girl. Twenty-five years, quarter of a century."

The hand gripped her flesh in another sharp squeeze, and unexpectedly he stooped to press his hairy mustache against her cheek. Abruptly he left her then, slamming the bedroom door behind him, and she heard the sound of his limp lessening in the hall and on the stairs. For a minute or two, she sat staring at her reflection, then quickly covered her face with her hands. Half consciously her lips murmured an Ave Maria, and when she removed the finger tips from her eyes, they were wet.

§ 2

Downstairs, Tilly was arranging some short yellow chrysanthemums in a vase for the center of the table, and Camilla was directing Jack and Gill what chairs from the upper floor to bring down and where to place them. The house was warm with the oily smell of kerosene stoves and the steamy odor of cooking. Banging legs and corners against the banister and treads, the twins were struggling with the chairs which they carried down two at a time. Everywhere prevailed the flurry of last minute preparations. Even Bart, under the supervision of Camilla, was sweeping into a dustpan the pieces of a glass tumbler which had been broken on the floor.

As Dan reached the lower hall, the front door was abruptly burst open, and Josh announced in a loud voice the arrival of the "Philos." He was gone again immediately, but Dan followed and reached the veranda just as the phaëton bearing his cousin and family drew up. Josh caught the horses' bits as Philo's oldest little girl, Josephine, scrambled to the ground, and Philo descended to swing from her seat his next in line—touseled-headed Jane—and to take from his wife's arms the five-year-old Peggy. Anna was the last to descend from the vehicle—a warm-eyed, dark-cheeked woman, with glistening black hair and red lips. Captain Dan had always admired her, and was conscious, now and then, of a pang of jealousy for the younger, handsomer man whom she had married. Anna was full-blooded, merry, sparkling; she showed splendid large white teeth when she laughed, was inclined to a comely amplitude, was big-bosomed, big-hipped, a woman, Captain Dan sometimes thought enviously, who might have married and satisfied a dozen men.

He kissed her heartily now, enjoying the warm pressure of her red lips as he affectionately slapped her on the broad back. She laughed, showing her flashing teeth, and struck him soundly in return. Philo good-naturedly looked on, his thin lips twisted in a thin smile, his fingers stroking his fine black mustache.

"You two—" he observed; "a fine pair!"

"Hello, Philo; hello, son; how're you?" said Captain Dan, his admiring eyes still on Anna, who gave back his look, a bantering expression on her face. She liked the Captain; she was one of the few who did not fear him.

Playfully she pounded his arm again.

"You're an old flirt, Captain Dan; I don't know what the folks round here 're going to do with you. I'm mighty glad you're not *my* husband!"

The rest of the family by this time swarmed out upon the porch to welcome the new arrivals. The phaëton, in charge of Josh, disappeared in the direction of the barn. Eva Ann piloted the three little girls upstairs, and Matty appeared, beaming, voluminous, placid, to add her smiling greetings to the others and carry Anna off to her own room. The men established themselves in the wicker chairs and began to discuss their favorite topic, cattle, with Jack and Gill, who shared a fascinated admiration for their Uncle Philo, lingering within earshot on the steps of the stoop. The man was in reality not their uncle, being their father's first cousin, but both Philo and Anna were referred to and addressed by all the children as "Uncle" and "Aunt."

§ 3

Ten minutes later Porter Farnsworth drove up with his wife, Gertrude, his two sons, Charley and Felix, respectively ten and eight, his little daughter, Ada, who was five, and the three-year-old Dora, who, of all the nephews and nieces, was her Aunt Matty's favorite.

Their coming marked the beginning of a general hubbub—voices, commotion, laughter—that filled the house for the rest of the evening. The Farnsworth boys, blond, anemic-looking lads by comparison with their dark sunburned cousins, were instantly annexed by Jack and Gill and enticed to the lower part of the lawn, where presently there seemed to have congregated a whole army of small boys—bobbing heads, waving arms, running legs, with an accompaniment of raucous yells:

"Y'u did not!"

"I did too-o."

The group on the veranda arranged itself in a half circle with Matty holding on her broad lap the black-haired, roguish-eyed Dora. A little apart from the others, Porter and Philo discussed in low tones what each had heard of the Captain's disagreement with Martinez.

"They say he damn near killed him."

"Martinez going about swearing he'll get him."

"A mean greaser."

"Vindictive son-of-a-bitch."

Dan was devoting his attention to his sister Gertrude.

She was a stiff-mannered woman, soft-spoken and unassertive in company, but tigerish in her devotion to her husband and children. She brooked no criticism of them, no matter how obvious their shortcomings, and was instantly in arms, bristling at the slightest reflection on their conduct. She was blue-eyed and blond, not pretty, but pleasant looking, with a soft fuzz on cheeks and chin, a pale mustache on her upper lip. Dan had little in common with her, but she was his sister, and as such he was fond of her.

"How things going over at your place, Gert?"

"Oh, nicely, thank you."

"Port tells me you're considering buying one of those new-fangled separators."

"We've been discussing it. Porter thinks it would be a good idea."

"Cost a lot of money, won't it?"

"It won't be money wasted if he decides in its favor."

"Say, Gert, why don't you send those boys of yours over to me and let them ride herd for awhile? They're pasty-looking little fellows. I got some longhorns coming up from Texas next week, and I could use those kids of yours. The cattle's got to be driven all the way from Gilroy. Be a great experience for 'em."

Gertrude's pale lips grew paler as she compressed them.

"Oh, I guess Charley and Felix are a trifle young for that yet," she said, with a nervous clearing of the throat. "They're getting along all right at school. I shouldn't want to disturb them. And they're quite strong and healthy."

"Hang school, Gert; give 'em some life in the open once in a while; toughen 'em up a bit. Look at Jack and Gill!"

The pale lips turned white.

"I wouldn't care to have them like Jack and Gill," she said, drawing in her chin, displaying the cords of her neck.

She was annoyed, her brother saw. He frowned, meditating a rebuke, when a squeak of iron and subsequent clang drew everyone's attention to the fact that the "Stephens" were at the entrance gate. Dan eyed his sister for a moment longer, then vented his irritation by a sharp exhalation through his nose. Rising, he went to stand at the center of the front steps to wait for his brother's surrey. Whoops and yells from the boys at play greeted their cousins as the vehicle swept around the circle of lawn. The racket gathered momentum with the surrey's progress until the briskly trotting team with difficulty was reined to a stop before the house. There the babble of voices in exchanges rose to an uproar. Confusion followed, with men and women mingling on veranda and steps, squirming children wriggling a passage through blockading legs and skirts, Shep, the Stephen Carters' dog, barking excitedly and the skittish horses, alarmed by so much noise, dancing restively in their tracks. These presently, to a warning shout of "Ada—Ada, look *out* there, will you!" were driven off by Josh to the peace and quiet of the barn.

By this time a pale November sun was nearing the horizon, setting in a cloudless pale blue sky, in pale yellow light. Matty looked anxiously at the clock in the hall and hurriedly urged her sister-in-law up the stairs to "lay aside her things" in her bedroom, a sanctum for the four matrons on this evening of festivity, a holy of holies, forbidden to the children, and denied to-night even to the Captain himself. Stephen's three sons scampered off to join the other boys, while Lottie and May, Ada and little Dora, Philo's Jane and Peggy found their way to Trudie's room, where mysterious chirpings and confidences promptly commenced.

"Reckon it'll be 'nother couple of years, Philo, 'fore we c'n make you sheriff," Stephen Carter said to his cousin over their handshake.

"Thanks, Steve, I'm not looking for the job, only, by God, I hope Joe Cook knows his business."

"We elected him kinder handsomely 'smy opinion; tribute to you, Capt'n."

"Heard anything from Ramiro, Dan? They say in town he's cussin' you an' vowin' vengeance."

"Who, Sanchez? That dirty Mex? He ain't likely to be setting his foot 'round here."

"I'd keep an eye out for him just the samey. He's liable to get drunk one of these here Saturday nights and get himself all full of liquor-courage."

"Ah, come off . . . . He won't cause no trouble."

"Well, you 'lected Joe Cook all right. Reckon you c'n have any sort of government round here you like."

"By dun, that's the way it ought to be, ain't it? Decent folks ought to get together and run things in a decent way. I'm looking forward to the time when we can get a charter for Carterville and be independent of those rustlers over in Guadalupe. Why, by dun, that's the way this country growed: folks settling some likely place, and by and by more folks coming to join 'em, and pretty soon a town, and pretty soon a city. Ain't that the way 'Frisco was started, and Los Angeles, and all the big towns like Baltimore back East? Why, who's that fellow . . . . I can't remember . . . . Oglethorpe, wasn't it? Didn't he come over from England with a lot of colonists and set out to build a town? Ain't that exactly what we're doing here?"

Dan thrust out his chin aggressively and thumped the floor with his cane.

Camilla joined the group and touched his arm.

"I think we can get started now."

"All right, my dear." He raised his voice in a shout.

"Hey, you rascals—come on—supper's ready."

Lizzie bustled out of the house in her rustling silk; with her was Anna Carter.

"It's so lovely, Captain Dan, for you and Matty to have us all here this way for your anniversary. It's the silver one, you know. Steve and I brought a little tea ball by way of a present."

Dan nodded unsmilingly; he did not like Lizzie. She was the only one of his relatives for whom he had a distaste. She was always gabbing, gabbing—and complaining.

"And here's a silver dollar, Dan," Porter spoke up, "a brand new one dated 1890! I got it from the 'Frisco mint—good for a lucky piece."

"Say, by George, that's pretty." The shining circle of silver had been bound by a fillet of gold. The Captain spun it in the air with his thumb and dropped it into his pocket.

"Well, Porter, that's kind of you. Ought to bring me *lots* of luck."

An avalanche of small feet descending the stairs interrupted further conversation, and up from the lawn charged a wild troop of yelling boys, panting, roughshod, disheveled, already grimy. The meeting was like a confluence of tides. For a minute or two pandemonium prevailed which even the Captain's voice could not quell. But presently there was a semblance of order. In response to commands of "Quiet, boys," "Be silent there," "Georgie, listen to Aunt Matty," "Girls, stop talking," "Bart, I'll lick you if you can't quiet down," the turmoil subsided, and the small fry, segregated from the more obstreperous contingent, was herded into the sitting room, and, assisted by the various mothers, helped to their seats.

"Now, be good girls and mind Eva Ann."

"You do what Eva Ann says, darling, and if you want Mama, you tell Eva Ann."

"Be careful not to spill your milk, sweetheart. Here, Lottie, I think you'd better sit next to her and see she doesn't get into trouble."

The four mothers, with Camilla and Tilly, circled the table, straightening, advising, helping the little girls to fill their plates, and then grouped themselves in the doorway.

"Don't they look darling! Oh, Mama, did you ever see anything prettier! Such a nice idea to have them all in here together, and doesn't May look too sweet for anything in her high chair."

"You know, Lizzie, that was Eva Ann's, then Bart's, and then Trudie's. I've had it down cellar for the last five years, and I never thought I'd have any use for it again."

"Please God, you never will, Matty." There was a fervent note in Lizzie's voice, and Tilly tittered.

"J'ever see sweeter children?"

"Just adorable!"

"Why, Matty, you've given them a gorgeous supper!"

"Well, let's go in to our own. The men're getting impatient."

With fond looks, the women turned away. Matty stepped to the front door.

"Come, folks; come, Dan; supper's ready. Let's go in."

"You ought to go in first, Matty, you and Captain Dan."

"Oh, yes, Matty, you and Captain Dan must lead the way. Come on, Captain."

"Don't be foolish, Matty. It's yours and Dan's anniversary. Nobody's going in till you do."

"Oh, go ahead, Captain. Give the lady your arm."

From the middle of the group, the Captain was pushed forward. There was a small outburst of encouraging remarks, and Lizzie clapped vigorously. Dan laughed, crooked his elbow, and Matty, simpering, placed her fingers lightly upon his arm as he led her into the dining room. The others trooped in; there was some confusion as they selected their seats, and then, with a general scraping of chairs, all sat down.

§ 4

There was a thick soup first, then oyster patties, then a platter heaped high with roast turkey, dressing, potatoes, two kinds of vegetables, mounds of fluffy white biscuit still warm from the oven, cranberry sauce in gravy boats, and tall glass containers half full of water, filled with leafy crisp celery. The feast concluded with thick wedges of mince and pumpkin pie, and chocolate cake. In spaces up and down the table stood red glass pitchers of claret punch, thick with floating slices of oranges, lemons, and bananas. From these, the ladies helped themselves, filling the small punch cups at their places, which were also of red glass and equipped with neat handles in which one conveniently hooked a forefinger. Apple cider was meted out to the boys, but Captain Dan, Stephen, Philo, and to a lesser extent, Porter, drank whisky and water, taking turns in filling one another's glasses.

The room grew warm and close. Spilled claret stained the white cloth, crumbs littered the floor. In spite of admonitions, there was a continual stream of small figures filing in and out, hurried entrances and exits from and to the other room, quick dashes to a mother's skirts for a whispered confidence or another bite of cake. As soon as the pie was served and eaten, the gorged and restless boys departed, leaving vacant places marked by crumpled napkins, soiled plates, and empty or half-empty glasses. Bart, wandering in, had had his attention caught by a story his father was telling of the mines at Almaden and had sunk into a chair to listen. He loved to hear his father talk of these adventurous days, but presently his eyes had drifted closed, and now his head lay upon the table in a welter of crumbs and débris, one flattened hand denting his cheek.

Camilla and Tilly worked indefatigably, carrying in, taking out, refilling glasses, replenishing plates. Tilly's face streamed perspiration from beneath her crimped "frizz," and she wheezed unpleasantly as she bent over the guests' shoulders to make a long reach for plate or pitcher. Camilla's face, too, was wet, and every now and then she swallowed convulsively as she hurried to the pantry and hurried out again.

The men took off their coats, sat in their shirt sleeves, and began to smoke; the women, especially Matty and Anna, surreptitiously squirmed in their seats, drawing themselves up very straight, sucking in their diaphragms to ease themselves in their tight corsets. Porter, who, for a time, had renounced smoking, crunched stalks of celery noisily with his teeth.

The company divided itself into two groups with the departure of the boys. Gertrude and Lizzie moved to seats on either side of Matty and in confidential tones discussed their children and household affairs. Close by them, Bart lay with his head upon his hand. At the other end of the table the men gathered about Captain Dan and Anna, who, during the meal, had sat next her host. Now and then Camilla and Tilly would pause in their work, and for a moment or two sink wearily into chairs at the table, attempting to listen to one or the other of the rival conversations. The four men and Anna made so much noise, it was difficult to hear anything the women said.

"By dun, Anna, that's out-ter-sight!" roared the Captain. The men guffawed, and banged the table till the glasses shook, spilling their contents.

Matty occasionally sent a worried glance in her husband's direction; she wanted nothing to go wrong on this evening of all evenings. It was growing late, after nine, and some of the smaller children should have been in bed an hour ago.

"Come, Anna, I think we'll go upstairs now. I want to talk to you, and to Gertrude and Lizzie."

"Aw, no," protested the Captain, "no--o; you go on, Matty, and leave Anna stay down here with us. We'll take good care of her, won't we, Anna?"

Anna laughed good-naturedly, flashing her white teeth; but she pushed away the Captain's detaining hand and rose. Philo had been watching her, had been doing so for some time, and she knew he was none too pleased by the way she had been "carrying on" with their host.

§ 5

Left to themselves and the sleeping boy, the men, except Porter, refilled their glasses. Stephen began explaining a theory of his own regarding the rotation of crops, and spoke deliberately, as he always did when touched with alcohol. Captain Dan and Philo, eyes fixed upon his face, appeared to listen, but neither followed him. The Captain's thoughts were of Anna, and Philo, as he stroked his thin mustache, was thinking of the sharp phrases he would use to her when he had her at home once more. Porter, who made no pretense of attending Stephen's harangue, sat slumped in his seat, wrenching great bites from celery stalks to crunch between his teeth.

Every once in a while, there rang through the house the excited voices of children, the thud and patter of running feet, while from the lawn came the hoarse clamor of the boys, invariably in altercation.

"Y'u did not!"

"I did too-oo."

"Go-an, y'u did not!"

§ 6

Upstairs in Matty's bedroom, Matty herself was unceremoniously divesting herself of her corset.

"There!" she cried, with a great breath of relief, throwing the armor of whalebone and white strings on the bed, "I couldn't stand that another minute. Too many of Matea's biscuits, I'm afraid. They were good, weren't they?"

"Wish I could take mine off; they're nearly killing me. I simply ate myself out of shape. Excellent dinner, Matty."

"Oh, wonderful. I think that dressing . . . ."

"What was in it, Matty?"

"Chestnuts."

"Where on earth did you get . . . ."

"Oh, 'Frisco. When Steve's man, Al, went to the city on Wednesday, I told him to bring me some."

"Lovely party. I don't see how you did it."

"It was nice, except for Francis not being here. I missed him dreadfully."

"What do you hear from him, Matty?"

"He's fine; expects to be ordained year after next. In his last letter he said they might send him to Rome."

"Think of that! To Rome! . . . . My goodness!"

"How old is he now, Matty?"

"Nineteen."

"Fancy! And being sent to Rome!"

"They'll let him come home, won't they, before then?"

"Oh, I hope so. But God's will, you know," Matty reminded them, with a complacent sigh.

"I think you're wonderful!" Lizzie said.

"I'm not wonderful at all."

"Matty, what are you going to do about that Miss Street?" Lizzie asked.

"Well, I want *Porter* to do something. She has absolutely no right to teach the children prayers or religion."

"Porter's been very busy . . . ." Gertrude began primly.

"She's been doing it for months, now," Lizzie declared; "ever since school opened. Lottie tells me she begins the day every morning by reading out of the Bible and saying a prayer."

"It ought to be stopped," Matty asserted.

"I don't see as it does any harm," Anna said.

The two older women turned shocked eyes upon her.

"I'll take all the children out of school if it continues," Matty asserted. "Eva Ann wants to go to a convent, anyway."

"The Captain will have something to say about that," Anna warned, in an irritating way.

The other women seemed a trifle nettled, and there was an unwonted flush in Matty's full cheeks as she said:

"I can't help that. If I think it's my duty I shall certainly send her to the Notre Dame Sisters in San José. I really will! But I *do* think," she went on mournfully, "I do think Porter ought to do something about that woman."

"Porter is thinking the matter over," Gertrude remarked stiffly; "I'm sure he will take the proper step when he thinks best. You can't interrupt a school term, you know."

"I'd keep Lottie and May home," Lizzie began uncertainly, "if I just were sure I was going to be *well*. . . . ."

The other women's heads instantly turned in her direction. There was a stricken silence.

"Why-y . . . . Lizzie Carter!" Matty exclaimed, in a flat tone.

"I'm awfully afraid so," Lizzie said, shaking her head.

"I thought you were," said Anna, scrutinizing her face, "when I saw you last week; I said so to myself. You were just the color of cheese!"

"I'm sorry, Liz," Matty said.

"Oh, *sorry!*" Lizzie echoed bitterly.

"You had an awful time, last time, didn't you?" Matty remembered.

A look of rebellion and fear crossed Lizzie's face.

"I know. And I'm beginning to feel so miserably sick again. And Steve . . . ."

"What does Steve say? Doesn't he want it?"

"Oh, you know what men are, Gert. It makes him mad, of course. Five . . . . five's enough," Lizzie lamented.

"Porter would be furious. I shouldn't dare have another. Four's a nice family."

"Well, *I* don't want any more; neither does Steve. . . . . It just seems too much."

"You wish sometimes the men had to have 'em," Matty mused.

They all laughed forlornly.

"I'm almost—almost tempted to *do* something," Lizzie presently said recklessly.

Matty gave her a sharp glance of rebuke.

"Why, that's no way to talk, Lizzie! It's *sin!*"

"I think it's a sin to have 'em if you don't want 'em, Matty."

"You'll want your darling baby fast enough when it's here," her sister-in-law said, attempting a maternal comforting tone.

Gertrude shook her head.

"I suppose *I'm* awful," she said presently, with an uneasy smile.

A quick look from Matty.

"How do you mean you're awful?"

Gertrude's pale face colored; realizing she had made a slip, she hurried on:

"Tell me, Matty, do you believe Heaven intended—I mean God intended—that men and women should bring more children into the world than they can properly take care of? Now, seriously, Matty, do you?"

"I think we're talking nonsense," Matty said uncomfortably.

"I don't think it's nonsense; it's not nonsense at all. Seems to me it's just common sense."

"I don't know that we even ought to talk about it," Matty said, secretly aghast that they had somehow drifted into these deep waters. "God knows what's best for all of us. We have to—to leave those things to Him."

"A girl doesn't leave her marriage to Him," Gertrude continued argumentatively. "She marries or she doesn't marry, just as she pleases. What about her children, then?"

"That sort of talk is all very silly," Matty protested, cornered and displeased.

"Well, Port and I don't intend to have any more than we've got."

"You don't mean, Gert," Lizzie asked timidly, in the silence, "you don't mean that you would . . . . *do* anything?"

The thin lips compressed themselves into their pale line as Gertrude shook her head.

Anna had not spoken. She had sat listening, turning her eyes from one speaker's face to another's. Now her sudden laugh drew sharp glances, but she made no effort to explain herself.

"She *has* had too much punch," thought Matty. Aloud she asked, and there was a touch of asperity in her tone:

"Why do you laugh, Anna?"

"Oh, nothing," Anna answered, laughing again; "you girls are all so funny!" She threw back her head in a gale of mirth.

Lizzie frowned, and Gertrude's lips formed again their hard white line.

"I don't see what there is to laugh at!" Lizzie said crossly. "I don't want to go through with another long miserable nine months with five children already, the oldest twelve, and all of them needing every minute of my time! I thought May would be my last, and I was simply good for nothing, carrying her. Why, you remember, Matty, how sick I was! And I just *hate* having to go through with it again!"

Lizzie began to cry, wiping her eyes on a ruffle of her stiff petticoat. Matty observed her with sympathetic eyes.

"I'm awfully sorry, Liz, and I'll help all I can. But you mustn't feel so badly. If it's God's wish, it's God's wish," she finished.

Gertrude looked impatient, opened her lips as if about to speak, closed them again. She rose to her feet upon a sudden determination.

"Well, I must see about getting my family home," she declared. "I don't know what I've been thinking about! It's long past ten o'clock, and I thought we'd be home by nine. I'll have to wake the children. I put Ada and Dora to sleep in Camilla's room, Matty; I knew you wouldn't mind. Ada went off like an angel, but that Dora . . . .! Lord knows what's happened to Charley and Felix . . . ."

She started for the door, but Lizzie, blowing her nose on a handkerchief borrowed from Matty, stopped her with a gesture.

"Wait a second, Gertrude, I'll go with you. I've got to wake Lottie and May, too, and we *must* be going home. It's been a wonderful party, Matty, and I hope you and Captain Dan will be celebrating your fiftieth. You must all come over to our house soon. I want you to try my muffins. It's been a perfect coon's age since you've been over. Wait—wait, Gertrude! I'm coming, right this minute. Kiss me, Matty, and wish me luck. . . . . I can't help it, I'm just sick over it."

§ 7

It was some time later that consciousness slowly returned to Bart, whose head, still pillowed on his rough little hand, lay on the table where he had fallen asleep. Camilla had thought more than once, as she passed through the dining room, of rousing him and sending him off to bed, but the diminutive May, Aunt Lizzie's youngest, had been "put down" in his room, and there was no place for him to go. So she allowed him to sleep on, but now Stephen and Lizzie and the five small "Stephens" had departed, and Camilla and Tilly, wrapped in shawls, were wandering in the moonlight.

The house had perceptibly quieted. Matty, declaring she was "dog tired," had sent word she would not be down again and wished everybody good-night. Upstairs the rumble of young male voices, and an occasional hard heel hitting the floor, indicated some of the boys were still awake, and from the parlor alternate intervals of whispering and giggling disclosed the whereabouts of Josephine, Jane, and Peggy, who had congregated in an admiring circle about their beloved Eva Ann. Philo Carter, their father, had but a few minutes before departed for the barn to harness his team.

Just what awakened Bart, he did not know. For some time he had been disturbed by an intermittent clatter of noises, people entering and leaving the room, bumping his chair, saying to each other in loud tones over and over: "Good-bye . . . . wonderful party!" "Good-bye . . . . wonderful party!" He had been conscious, too, of the light that glaringly streamed down upon him from the lamp overhead. But these discomfitures presently passed, and he had fallen once more into slumber.

Now his eyelids drifted open, and he found himself looking directly at his father and Aunt Anna. They were in the corner of the dining room; his father had his arms tightly around Aunt Anna. He was kissing her roughly on the neck and cheek, and she was laughing, her head thrown back, showing two white rows of teeth. As she laughed, she continued to strike him on the head and shoulders with her fists, hitting him with all her strength. Bart's first thought was she might be hurting him, but in a moment he realized his father was enjoying her struggles. As the boy watched, Aunt Anna with a violent effort wrenched herself free from his father's grasp, pushed him from her, holding him so, and then Bart saw that they were both panting and laughing

"You she-devil," Bart heard his father say, and he saw him take her in his arms again. They struggled in the embrace, knocking a chair to one side, and the man roughly pinned her into the corner. Then she bit him, sinking her sharp teeth into his cheek as he pressed his mouth against her face.

The Captain sprang away then, his face convulsed, his hand to the wound, and between his closed fingers the blood oozed redly. In spite of the fury in his face, and the pain that marked it, Bart was surprised to see Aunt Anna still laughed. She slipped by the Captain now, thrusting her tumbled hair into place and straightening her dress, and laughed again at his scowling countenance.

"Philo's coming," she said. "I hear the team. You'll find that hard to explain," and she laid a finger on her own cheek in the spot where she had bitten his. "I'll tell him you've gone to bed."

"You she-devil," the Captain said between his teeth. "I'll get you for this! You see if I don't. You think you're too smart for me, but I'll have my way with you, you devil, sure's my name's Dan Carter."

Anna rolled her dark eyes and laughed again.

"Well, I shan't mind your trying," she said, flashing him a look, and, as he made a step toward her, she raised her voice to reach her children in the parlor.

"Josephine, Jane, Peg! Get your things on; here's Papa."

§ 8

Tilly parted the leaves that grew thickly along the base of the tank house and disclosed one white flower of ethereal beauty.

"Look, Camilla, one left!"

"What do you call them, Tilly?"

"Matillaja poppies. They're Spanish, you know. . . . . I'm not sure of that, of course. They probably grew here in California when the Padres came, and probably the priests named them. But I always think of them as Spanish—a beautiful white Castilian maiden shut up in a turret! Smell, Camilla—isn't that an intoxicating perfume. . . . . Oh, do you think I shall ever fall in love?"

"Of course."

"Have you ever been deeply, madly, passionately in love?"

"Why, you know I haven't! I don't think you ought to use words like that!"

"Oh, just to you . . . . Camilla, have you ever noticed someone round here?"

"What? Who do you mean?"

"There's a man . . . ."

"What man?"

"Someone who is lithe and graceful and rides his horse like a Don Juan."

"Don Juan?"

"Well—he's wonderful!"

"Tilly!"

"He suspects nothing, but, oh, I—I——"

"Who you mean? I want to know."

A hysterical giggle, accompanied by a writhing twist of Tilly's body.

"You'll make fun of me!" She buried her face on Camilla's shoulder and clung to her.

"Tilly, look at me! What have you been up to?"

"Oh, nothing, nothing, Camilla, only I—I *love* him!"

"Why, Tilly Carter! Look at me, I say! Look at your sister and tell me his name."

"He's—he's—I don't know his last name."

"What's his first, then?"

"Rodoni calls him 'Sus'—the one," dropping her voice reverentially, "named 'Jesus'!"

Camilla took a step backward to gaze, in the obscurity of the shadow in which they were standing, at the featureless pale oval that was her sister's face.

"Why, Tilly Carter—he's one of the men!"

"I know," admitted Tilly, covering her eyes with both hands and beginning to sob.

"A cow-man!" continued Camilla in shocked tones.

"I know, I know; but I love him—passionately . . . ."

"Nonsense! Have you been talking to him?"

"Oh, *no*. We've never exchanged a word, but I dream of him at night. The most wonderful dreams . . . . And I'm with him on a horse, and we go galloping, galloping, galloping . . . ."

"Why, Tilly! I shall have to speak to Papa."

"Camilla!"

"Or to Mama."

"No, no, you mustn't. I just told you, dearest. Nobody must know, and nobody shall ever know. It's my secret, the secret I shall carry with me to my grave."

"You make me positively ill, Tilly."

"Oh, dearest, dearest one, my only friend and confidant, don't say such things. I turn to you in my great anguish——"

"I shan't listen to such silliness . . . . A *cow-man!"*

"But, oh, Camilla, have you ever seen the way he rides? So lithe, so sinuous . . . ."

"He's nothing but a Mexican, a greaser!"

"I think him a wonderful gentleman."

"You ought to go to confession."

"Oh, I know, I know. I'm a prey to the most dreadful thoughts."

"Listen here, and I'll tell you something I've never told you before—something really important!"

"Camilla!"

"Well, there's a man——"

"Where? Who? . . . . Oh, tell me, Camilla! Are you in love?"

"Tilly, behave yourself, or I won't tell you a thing."

"I promise."

"You remember last September, when I went with Mama up to San José?"

"Yes, yes . . . ."

"Well, when we came back, Tony Rodoni was supposed to meet us at the train in Gilroy and drive us home."

"Well?"

"He was late, and Mama went into that restaurant there—you know, Speegle's Grill—for a cup of tea, but I didn't want any, so I waited for her outside and wandered a little way up the street. Well, there was a little book shop there, a magazine and book shop; I'd never seen the place before; it had just been opened, he said . . . ."

"*Who* said? Oh, Camilla, I can hardly *wait!*"

"Well, now, listen. I went in and asked if I might look at one of the magazines while I waited. I wanted to see if there was a pattern for a school dress for Eva Ann——"

"I know, what happened?"

"Well, then he said——"

"*Who* said?"

"The man who runs the store—the proprietor—Mr. Gardiner."

"Mr. Gardiner! How beautiful! What's his first name?"

"Well, he says everybody calls him Frank, but his full name is Benjamin Franklin Gardiner."

"Oh, beautiful," gasped Tilly. "And what then?"

"We had a little talk, and he told me about himself, and I told him a little about *my*self, and he gave me a present of the magazine."

"He didn't!"

"Oh, yes, he did. He made me take it, and he said I was the first person, the first real person . . . ."

"Well, *what?*"

"Oh, something like that. We didn't have more than ten minutes' conversation, for Mama came in and was very cross because Tony was waiting and they hadn't been able to find me."

"And is that all?"

"Not exactly."

"Well, what! *Goodness,* Camilla, you'll drive me crazy!"

"He knew my name, of course; I told him: 'I'm Miss Camilla Carter,' I said; 'Father has a cattle ranch over near Guadalupe.' That's all. But yesterday—no, it was the day before—what do you think? Josh brought the mail over from the post office, and in it—what do you think?—there was a little book from him, some of Tennyson's poems; and on the flyleaf, in the sweetest handwriting you ever saw, he'd written: 'To Camilla Carter—my first friend in California!' and he'd signed his name, 'Franklin Gardiner.'"

"Oh, Camilla! How thrilling!"

"He's dear, only about twenty-one or -two, I should think. He told me he had come out here for his health. He had an uncle who had a ranch near Gilroy, and he came out here to visit him. Then the uncle died, and so Franklin—— Listen to me calling him 'Franklin'! . . . . Oh, dear, I'm *such* a goose!"

"No, no, you're not! Why shouldn't you call him 'Franklin'? You will when you marry him."

"Oh, hush, Tilly; don't talk such nonsense."

"Tell me, Camilla, shall you answer him? Just a note saying 'Thank you'?"

"Well—I was wondering if I ought."

§ 9

More than an hour later, the two sisters cautiously returned indoors. Soon after the rattle of Philo Carter's phaëton had died away down the road, they had seen the lamps within the house go out one by one, first those downstairs, next, the one in the upper hall, and lastly the light in their parents' bedroom, which winked once or twice, then winked out. Now the black pile and grounds were wrapped in stillness and moonlight. Crickets were chirping at irregular intervals, and, in the direction of the wild lilacs along the creek, an owl hooted a persistent long complaining note.

Within, the air was still warm and fetid. The smell of food, cigars, and whisky filled the empty rooms, and there prevailed a sense of disorder. After the cold crisp air of the night, the rank, choking atmosphere was foul and suffocating. Camilla paused before going upstairs, and raised a few windows; then she found her sister's hand in the darkness, and together on tiptoe they want up to their room. They did not light the lamp, but quickly undressed, slipping on over their heads their ruffled nightdresses. Neither spoke; both were lost in reverie, and each was happily conscious of the other's mood and sympathy.

Camilla, finishing her prayers first, rose and went to the window. She pushed down the upper sash until it was on a level with the lower one and leaned her bare elbows on the top of the two frames. The night air was sharp and struck her face, neck, and arms with a cold breath, but she was unmindful of it, and filled her lungs with deep breaths of its clean, fresh sweetness.

Tilly remained longer on her knees, praying fervently, softly beating her crimped forehead with her clasped fingers as she voicelessly offered her petition. When she rose her face was wet, but there was elation upon it. She came then to stand beside her white-robed sister and slipped an arm around her waist. They remained at the window for several minutes, looking out over the moon-flooded lawn below them, and beyond to the treeless bare stretches of the ranch. The moon bathed the landscape in a murky haze of white light. There was hardly any sound, and no movement to be seen. Still, breathless, swathed in silver, the earth lay peacefully sleeping.

Tilly's head sank to her sister's shoulder.

"Tired, darling?" Camilla asked.

Tilly shuddered and made no answer. Then Camilla breathed:

> " 'Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,
> But to be young was very heaven!' "

"Yes," Tilly repeated; " 'to be young was very heaven,' " and after a moment adding, "and to be in love."

There was a long interval. Camilla ended it, saying softly:

"We're the only things alive, to-night, Tilly—the only beings awake in this house, in this whole world, as far as we can see! Everything and everybody's asleep—sound, sound asleep. Only the moon there is awake!"

§ 10

But Camilla was wrong. There was one other person awake in the Carter house, a small boy with a ribby chest, hard warty hands, and a mass of thick tangled hair. He had been awake for two hours and more, lying in his narrow bed, staring up into the blackness above him, the only light a bright parallelogram of moonshine on the opposite wall. His tears had dried now upon his cheeks, but his brows were contracted in a frown as he lay there, a frown of perplexity, and of some choking emotion he could not name.

Over and over, the scene he had unwittingly witnessed passed before his mind, and he could clearly hear the savage intonation of his father's voice as he said:

"You she-devil. I'll get you for this."

On a sudden, the words and the picture came back to him with sharpness; he smelt the smell of stale food, cigars, and whisky; he heard Aunt Anna's laugh, he saw the red trickle of blood oozing from between his father's closed fingers.

A whimper escaped him; he shut his lips upon the sound, his eyes in a fierce squeeze. Presently, upon a sob he whispered:

"Oh, no, Papa—no, no. Don't do it again, Papa .... No—no—please—please don't do it again."

CHAPTER IV

§ I

"OH—OH, gee!" yawned Gill.

"What's eating you?" Jack asked.

"Sleepy."

"Well, why don't you go to bed early?"

Gill shot him a bored glance.

"You make me sick," he said, without feeling.

There was a pause; then Jack, huddling inside his shabby overcoat, observed:

"It's gosh-darned cold this morning," and after a moment, "I wish his Nibs would get a wiggle on."

The two boys were sitting on the steps of the peaked-roofed little church in Carterville. It was the morning following the anniversary party at Los Robles, and being the second Sunday in the month, it was the day when Father Regan, in the course of his monthly rounds, arrived to hear confessions and celebrate Mass. He usually drove over from San Geronimo. Heaven knew at what black hour of the morning he left Guadalupe to say the seven o'clock service in the former place. From there, still fasting, he drove the intervening miles in his rickety, dusty buggy, and Carterville looked for him sometime after ten.

Jack and Gill had the proud distinction of being altar boys, and were openly envied by all their cousins. Half an hour earlier, they had left the ranch in the surrey and had brought over Camilla and Tilly, who were at this moment inside the church, sweeping the floor and arranging flowers. The girls threw themselves with passionate intensity into this work and vied with one another in subjecting themselves to the most arduous tasks. On this particular morning there had been actually some heat in their words on the way over as to whose privilege it should be to sweep the dusty floor. Their brothers, sitting on the front stoop of the building, knew it had been

Tilly who had won the argument; they could tell by the vigorous way she banged back the kneeling benches in the pews so as to sweep beneath them.

Unbuttoning his overcoat, Gill explored the pockets of his jacket and produced a battered cigarette box from which he shook out a lone cigarette. The tobacco had fallen out of part of it, but this gave him no concern; he proceeded to light it with a sulphur match pried free from a small block, and, as he shielded the flame between his palms, he drew back and held his breath to escape the choking fumes.

Jack eyed him with disapproval. It was a question in his mind whether in view of the holy office in which they would participate that morning it was right for Gill to smoke.

"Where'd you get it?" he demanded after a moment.

"Georgie Carter. He hooked half a box off Uncle Stephen."

"Better not let Ma catch you."

Gill showed him a small photograph of an actress, a big-hipped, stage beauty in tights,—Della Fox. Such photographs were given away as premiums with a certain brand of cigarettes at that time, and all boys collected them.

"Oh, gee," Jack exclaimed in admiration, taking the picture in his hand. "That's a peach! . . . . Shoot you for it?"

"Let's see what you got."

Jack brought out from his own pocket a bundle of similar photographs, bound together by a double twist of elastic. His brother ran them over appraisingly.

"Got her . . . . and her . . . . and her . . . . and her," he remarked, as he passed them through his fingers. He stopped at Georgia Cayvan, and presently at Nellie Melba, hesitating a long moment before Julia Marlowe Taber.

"Shoot you Della for *her,*" he offered.

Jack considered, then agreed.

At once, the boys scrambled to their feet and betook themselves to a spot directly in rear of the church. With the scrape of his foot, Jack marked a line in the soft dirt some twelve feet from the side of the building, and toeing this, each of the boys in turn, with a vigorous snap of his thumbs, proceeded to sail the stiff bits of cardboard against the wall, the object being to land the photographs as close as possible to the base of the building.

They were intent upon the contest, when there came a shrill summons from Tilly.

"Ja—*hack!* . . . . G—*hill!*"

Their names, shrieked out in this fashion upon the cold still air of the Sunday morning, brought to each a sharp sense of wrongdoing: Gambling! Actresses! Presently they would be assisting the priest on the altar! They crammed the pictures into their pockets and ran to obey the summons.

"Doggone it!" Jack whispered, in disgust.

They found their sister in the doorway of the church, one arm filled with great drooping branches of pepper clustered with berries, the other holding a tall brass vase.

"Get some water from the trough, will you, boys? We're almost finished—just the last of the flowers. . . . . What time is it, Cam?" she called over her shoulder, and from the interior of the church came the echoing answer, "Ten to."

"Then hurry, boys; the folks'll probably be here any minute."

Indeed, as Gill took the vase and turned away toward the watering trough, the early teams with the first of the morning's congregation were to be seen slowly jogging along the road. He recognized Manuel Silva's red mare in the lead. Silva lived twenty miles over the ridge, almost at the crest of La Canada Pass. He and his family must have begun their journey shortly after six that morning. The old bony horse could not travel more than six miles an hour. Directly behind him came the Bacigalupis with their horde of running-nosed, squirming children, and following, rapidly overhauling them, Gill saw the home ranch's buckboard. Josh was driving; his brother knew their father's way of handling a team, and it was not the Captain who held the reins. In the vehicle would be Gill's mother, Eva Ann, and the two kids.

From an opposite direction, he descried the Philo Carters' phaëton approaching, but still there was no sign of the priest. Gill hesitated to start ringing the bell; once Father Regan had failed to appear, and, after waiting nearly two hours, the disappointed congregation had regretfully dispersed.

The sun was obscured to-day behind a gray and lowering mist; there had been a heavy frost in the night. The stubble in the fields and the roadside grasses were still whitely rinded with it. As the teams arrived, the drivers hitched them to posts or fences and proceeded to blanket the steaming backs of the horses; puffs of vapor like white plumes spouted with every breath from the nostrils of the animals. The men gathered into two groups: the more important ones and the cattle owners around the church's entrance; the lesser, Silva, Bacigalupi, Joe Bettencourt, and their like, a little further off. The talk was of the recent election, of cattle, crops, and the past, present, and future state of the weather. The women, bonneted and shawled, filed into the church and at once gave themselves over to their devotions, eyes fast shut, fingers on their beads. Camilla and Tilly, with old Mrs. Cudahy, who fancied she had a voice, grouped themselves about the organ, which stood just within the vestibule, and discussed the music for the day.

A quarter of an hour late, the priest made his appearance. He was a stranger to the community: a black-haired young Irishman with a brogue that was hardly intelligible. Father Regan, it appeared, was sick, and Father Duffey had been sent in his place. He drove up in the old priest's familiar dilapidated buggy, and, after tying the jaded horse to a fence post, unloaded a heavy, shiny black bag containing the altar vessels. Carrying this, he passed at once into the church, thence to the vestry, Jack and Gill decorously following. To his delight, Bart was allowed to ring the bell.

In a few minutes the priest, robed in soutane and stole, reappeared, and, proceeding down a side aisle, entered the confessional, to which, one by one, first the maturer children, and next their elders, with bowed heads, reverently approached, waiting their turns.

A hush filled the church. It was cold, and its bareness, despite the flower vases, was particularly cheerless. Men and women, kneeling upon the hard benches, hugged about them their coats and wraps; occasionally there rose the sound of sibilant whispers and a hard cough which echoed against the walls. The men, who had been conversing outside, now began filtering into the building, their rough shoes making a noisy clatter upon the floor as they heavily settled themselves into their places. Stephen Carter, tall and lean, arrayed in the only Prince Albert coat known to the community, walked impressively down the center aisle and established himself in a pew beside his wife and children.

Directly in front of him was ranged his brother's family, with Captain Dan missing. First came the voluminous Matty, next to her, Josh, then Eva Ann, Bart, and the small Trudie. Eva Ann, her face buried in her hands, her shoulders hunched forward, her elbows pressed close against her sides, prayed fervently.

Across the aisle, Anna Carter, large-busted, fine-looking, in a dark red silk waist with huge ballooning sleeves, and a brown hat whose brim was caught up by a brown bird's slick wing, leaned comfortably against the back of the pew, her pretty trio of daughters beside her. Now and then, Bart's eyes turned in her direction, watching her covertly, conscious of dislike. Philo Carter, like Captain Dan, was not in church.

Though professing no religion in particular, the Farnsworths were perfectly willing to have their children accompany their cousins to the Catholic services on Sundays, and to-day, Charley, Felix, and Ada sat huddled together in a corner of Anna's pew.

Matty closed her eyes, her mind wandering. She was thinking of Lizzie and calculated that if her sister-in-law's suspicions were correct it would bring the number of the Carter children up to twenty-two—the family, counting the grown-ups, to thirty. Soon there would be grandchildren—none by Francis, of course—but Camilla would marry, no doubt, and then Tilly; yes, there was no reason to think some good man shouldn't take a fancy to Tilly. After her, the rest; soon there'd be so many grandchildren it would be difficult to keep track of them. She estimated, checking them over by families, that there were twenty-two of the Carters in church at that very moment, good Catholics all . . . . well, perhaps, Porter's and Gertrude's children weren't exactly that, but they would be some day, and their parents as well.

Someone was sobbing hysterically in the confessional, and, a moment later, as the penitent emerged, Matty, allowing herself a discreet glance in that direction, was mortified to see that it was Tilly! Tilly, always emotional, always making a show of herself! Matty sighed deeply. . . . . She would have to take that girl in hand!

Her breast rose again almost immediately upon another breath, this one of pride and joy. Gill and Jack, clad in their red cassocks and lace, entered from a side door near the altar and, with long tapers, proceeded to light the candles. Matty noticed how quick and sure of himself Gill was, and how slowly, methodically Jack went about the work. Remarkably different for twins, the two boys were, she decided for the hundred-thousandeth time since their birth—Gill ever alert, scheming; Jack, amiable, easy-going. The ding-donging bell reminded her that another of her children was playing his part in the day's services, and almost with the thought, the little wheezing organ at the back of the church swelled beneath Camilla's touch and pumping. Matty heard the voices of her two daughters, and the shrill one of old Mrs. Cudahy, break forth into:

"'Mary, help—oh, help we pray . . . .'"

Five children assisting in the Mass, and her oldest son soon to take orders! Well, any time now, Matty told herself, she was ready for her *Nunc Dimittis.*

The priest, arrayed for the Mass, came out of the sacristy, bearing the covered chalice, Jack and Gill in his wake. He ascended the steps and began silently to move illuminated texts and cruets to and fro, sighing now and then audibly, with hunger, cold, and fatigue. Genuflecting abruptly, he suddenly said loudly:

"Introibo ad altare Dei!"

The boys murmured responses.

Matty pressed her hands tightly over her face and offered a grateful prayer of her own. As she raised her glistening gaze to the three figures at the altar, a third shudder—this of horror!—passed over her. Before her were the two darling boys, with cherub faces and innocent eyes, looking pure and sanctified in their robes and lace, bowed on the altar steps on either side the priest, while there, protruding from beneath their garments as they knelt, were their shoes—yes, all four of them!—foul with filth and fresh manure!

§ 2

There was no doubt that there was a large wild animal caught in the trap. Bart was so excited that he danced first on one foot, then on the other, and kept saying over and over: "Oh, gee, what'll we do, fellers?"

He felt privileged to act as excitedly as he liked, for it was his trap, a figure four which he had made, baited, and set the previous day. He had had foresight enough to weigh down the trap with a large flat rock lugged up from the creek, and whatever kind of a beast was in the box, *he* had caught it. His trap, his prize, and the three other boys had been asked merely to come and advise what had better be done.

The family had returned from church ravenously hungry, and Matty had insisted on bringing home the new young priest to share with them an enormous meal of hot bread, eggs, steak, potatoes, flapjacks, even pie. After it was over, Jack and Gill, with the rest of them, had sat about in a gorged, indolent state, unwilling to bestir themselves to any effort. But not so the Captain and his youngest son.

The head of the house was frankly in bad humor, and everybody knew it.

" 'Ware your father," Bart had heard his mother telling Camilla; "don't cross him, whatever you do. Something's gone wrong. Perhaps he had a bit too much last night. He must have had some sort of an accident—cut himself, maybe. His cheek's got an ugly wound. I'm not asking questions to-day!"

Captain Dan had been riding over the ranch since early morning, and he was off again even before the heavy midday meal was over.

As for Bart, he had plans of his own. Throughout the church service he had been thinking about his traps and wondering what his prizes might be. Sometimes he caught rabbits, sometimes squirrels, and once he had captured a skunk.

To-day, after he had successfully slipped unobserved from the table, changed from his best suit to his ragged overalls, made the rounds of the various secluded spots where his traps were hidden, he finally came to his prized figure four, a hundred yards or so beside the creek above the Chinese camp. While still some distance away, he realized it held an animal of some size. The box, despite the heavy rock that weighed it down, moved and danced as his approaching feet made hard crackling sounds on the dried, brittle oak leaves covering the ground. The boy paused at a respectful distance; it took him no more than a moment to decide that the situation was one with which he could not cope single-handed. At once, he set off at a run for the house, first to find young Tony Rodoni, who owned a .22 caliber rifle, and then, from the hallway outside the parlor, by winks and beckoning gestures, to entice his two brothers, Jack and Gill, into leaving the family group.

The boys had immediately been interested in what he had to report, but while they hurriedly followed Bart, it pleased them to appear incredulous, treating the matter of his capture in a ribald way.

"Maybe it's a mountain lion!" Gill suggested.

"Oooo! Maybe it's a bear!" Jack hazarded, with a pretended shudder.

"Well," Tony offered, taking his cue from the scoffers, "you never can tell about these here little old figure fours. Sometimes, you know, you lift up the box, and there standing looking right at you is a young *cow!*"

The twins shouted, and Bart lost his temper.

"Well, gee-whillikens!" he said, stopping short and wheeling on them, "you don't have to come along if you don't believe me. I tell you it is something big; he's just a—a—a *whopper!*"

Now, however, as they stood grouped about the box which lay with the heavy rock upon its inverted bottom, the older boys were inclined to be anything but skeptical. An animal, wild and savage, was within the trap, and the question was whether to kill him by shooting through the box, or attempt to capture and put him in a cage. All favored the latter proposition, but first, as Tony pointed out, they ought to know what kind of an animal it was. Certainly the creature was unusual. A strong, meaty aroma clung about the trap, reminding them all of a circus menagerie they had once visited in San José.

Tony, kneeling on the box, proceeded with his left hand, his right being still bandaged, to cut a small hole in its roof. Gill hurried off to the stables to bring his own and Jack's lariats, while the latter went to the tool-house to fetch a spade. The plan was to dig a small trench large enough for a runway. The box was then to be edged over it, and the animal urged to escape by way of it, while Jack and Gill, the nooses of their ropes draped about the hole, were to lasso him as he emerged.

While his brothers were absent, Bart continued in an ecstasy of excitement.

"What do you think he is, Tony? Say, if it's a wildcat, what'll you do? You won't be able to keep him, will you? . . . . Maybe it's a coyote. Gosh, you'll have to shoot him then, won't you? But I can have his skin, can't I? Say, Tony, if you have to shoot him, will you skin him for me? . . . . Say, Tony, it couldn't be a little bear, could it? . . . . Maybe it's a lynx!"

Tony frowned over his task, dug awkwardly into the wood and made no answer. His silence was in no sense a rebuff; he was a good-natured boy, happy-go-lucky, friendly. Suddenly there came an unexpected bump and snarl from within the box.

"Say, did you see that!" Tony exclaimed, involuntarily drawing back his head. "Old Mr. Wildcat made a snap at me. Guess he don't like my little old knife going boring in after him that-a-way."

"Oh, Tony—is it a wildcat, do you think?"

"Never can tell. There ain't no light in this little old box, and there's no way of seeing! . . . . Say, look out, kid; you don't want to get your phiz too near there; he might make a claw at you."

Jack came running up with the spade across his shoulder, and Tony directed him where to dig the trench; Gill arrived a moment later with two hair lariats. They all worked on the furrow which shortly was considered sufficiently long and deep; Bart brought some water up from the creek in his hat for wetting and patting the ground into shape. Then, with much excitement and many conflicting directions, the box was carefully shoved along the ground until an edge of it was over one end of the trench. About the aperture were arranged the nooses of the lariats, and Tony proceeded to urge the captured prize to attempt escape.

"Doggone him, he won't budge," he said, poking vigorously with a branch beneath the opposite end of the box.

Then something happened.

"Look *o-out!*"

Bart saw a flash of red fur, the box careened to one side, and an animal darted into the open. The creature eluded one of the ropes, but Jack jerked his in time to catch him about the middle; it turned and faced them—a pointed-eared, snapping-eyed red fox, baring his sharp little white teeth just like an angry dog. For a moment he studied his captors, twitching his small head from side to side as he glanced from one to the other; then, without warning, he darted straight at them. A shout went up, Jack kicked at him as he came, Tony, upon his knees, struck with the branch, Bart fled to the shelter of a tree, and Gill, the muzzle of the rifle in his hands, swung it above his head and clubbed at the beast with its butt.

There was a report, a puff of smoke, the fox fled, dragging the long lariat behind him, and Gill, dropping the rifle, sank with a little moan to the ground.

"Oh, Mother of God, he's shot!"

"Oh, Gill . . . . Gill . . . ."

"Say, boy . . . . *boy!* Where're you hurt?"

Silence. Tony turned him over gently and bent low, watching closely. Gill's eyes were shut, and his face was greenish white.

"Lissen, Gill, lissen. Can't you hear me? Tell me where you're hurt?"

There was no trace of blood. Tony attempted with an exploring hand to investigate.

The injured boy's face twitched, the eyelids fluttered.

"Don't, Tony, don't. It's my arm—up there above the elbow—'tain't nothing, I reckon."

Then Bart saw the drenched sleeve, and felt suddenly sick at the pit of his stomach.

§ 3

Captain Dan met the boys as Tony and Jack, their hands interlocked to form a seat, Gill's uninjured arm about the former's neck, were carrying him to the house. Tony had twisted a torn strip of Gill's shirt above the purplish spot in the boy's arm, and the bleeding had stopped. The bullet, traveling upward, had entered the fleshy part of the arm above the elbow, had bored its way through about eight inches of flesh and muscle, making an exit just below the shoulder. Apparently it had encountered no bones, and Gill, after the first momentary feeling of pain and shock, was rather enjoying the solicitude of his companions and the concern and attention he foresaw would be his at the house.

His father gently pressed the injured arm with his thumb, made Gill move it at the elbow, directed the two boys to take him into the house and to tell Tony's father to telephone to Guadalupe for Doctor Medcraft.

"You lie still, Gill, until the doc gets here. It may take him two or three hours, but, by dun, I don't want you to move until he sees you. Understand? I don't think it's anything more than a flesh wound, but you c'n never tell. . . . .

"Here, you," he said to Bart, as the others moved off, "I want you to take this message over to your Aunt Anna. I've been looking for one of you boys all afternoon. You give it to her, see? I don't want nobody to know about it, y'understand? Now, move along, and if there's an answer you keep looking for me until you find me."

He handed Bart an envelope, then limped away with his usual hurried swaying gait after his wounded son.

Bart stood looking at the envelope, and as he stared the writing blurred, and the envelope became a whitish square. The excitement of the afternoon's adventure—the captured fox, and then the shooting accident, in both of which he had played important parts—was cruelly dashed. Not to accompany the other boys, not to participate in all the hubbub which was certain to follow as soon as the news spread, not to be able to tell his version of the story, was bitter disappointment. He must forego it because of such an errand! Resentment filled his heart, but it never occurred to him to disobey.

As he reluctantly followed the county road toward the Philo Carter home, angrily kicking into clouds of dust the soft ridges of powdered soil left by wagon wheels, it commenced to sprinkle. The boy looked savagely at the leaden sky.

"Oh, go on—rain," he said aloud, his voice near breaking, "go on, rain; I don't care what you do! . . . . Rain and rain and rain and *rain!*"

Uncle Philo let him in when he reached the house. On any other day of the week, Bart would have found the door open, half-a-dozen persons or more about the place, who could have told him where to find his aunt. Coming face to face with her husband in this unexpected way was disconcerting.

Philo had the Sunday paper in his hand, was in his stocking feet, was coatless, vestless; his broad belt, at which the large black-handled revolver in the blackened leather holster dragged heavily, hung from a corner of the low rocker before the stove. The room was close and hot. The cold rain and air from outside annoyed the man, and his first words were sharp and irritable.

"Come in, come in; don't stand out there like a donkey. Wipe your feet and come inside. Who'd you want to see? The girls are all over at Aunt Gertrude's."

Bart entered, and Philo shut the door after him with a slam. The boy felt dazed, confused, and his heart began to hammer. He foresaw he faced a situation. Under no circumstances must Philo learn of the letter.

His uncle slumped into the rocker and rustled the newspaper.

"Who'a you want to see, son?" he asked, in a more mollified tone.

Bart swallowed.

"Aunt—Aunt Anna," he managed.

The youngster's hesitancy drew the man's glance.

"What for?" he asked.

"Oh, 'bout somethin'."

Philo eyed him closer.

"What?"

"Oh, somethin'."

There was a pause; then from the man:

"Well, she's lying down. You can't see her. . . . . What did you want to see her about, anyhow?"

Bart twisted his jaw from side to side and dug a toe of a wet shoe into the pattern of the carpet. He felt himself turning red.

"Look here," said Philo crossly, "what's the matter with you? I asked a civil question; haven't you a tongue in your head?"

The crimson in Bart's face deepened; his eyeballs pained with the blood that pounded behind them. He could only hang his head. Philo scowled.

"Come here," he ordered.

Bart miserably approached.

"Y'understand what it means to be polite? I've asked you a question, and all you do is to act like a whipped dog! If you were my kid, I'd whale the tar out of you. . . . . What do you want round here, anyway? If you don't speak up, I'll tell your father about you. He'll give you something that'll teach you to be polite!"

For some reason for which he could find no explanation, Bart perceived the man in the chair had grown suddenly very angry. His hand twitched on the polished arm of the rocker, and it was obvious he was struggling to keep from cuffing the small figure before him. Bart was not afraid; at the moment, he felt he would be glad if his uncle did strike him.

The situation was saved by the appearance of Aunt Anna, who entered the room by the narrow steep staircase which led from upstairs. She had been lying down; her black hair streamed like a horse's tail down her back, her face was flushed and marked with the imprint of the pillow; about her bare arms and over her uncorseted bosom, she wore a pink sacque, edged with pink ribbons, flowing with pink streamers.

"What's all the rumpus?" she asked lightly.

Briefly and sourly Philo explained.

"The boy says," he finished with a scowl, "he wants to see you. I think he's a little liar."

Anna displayed no particular interest as she listened; her eyes were upon Bart while her husband talked, and when he had done she smiled and asked pleasantly:

"Well, what is it, Bart?"

A chasm yawned beneath the youngster's feet. He thought of the fox in the trap and reminded himself of his resolution: the envelope inside the hip pocket of his shabby overalls must not be discovered. Dignity, reason, everything was swept away; he did not care now. He choked back the tears, blindly sought the door, blindly groped for the knob, opened it, and stumbled out into the rain to freedom and safety.

At the corner where the driveway joined the county road stood a lone, tall, ragged eucalyptus tree. Bart stopped here, hiding behind its trunk, and waited for composure to return. He despised himself for having made such a mess of things and thought with alarm of what his father would say to him when he found out he had failed to carry out his commission.

"Darn the thing, anyhow," he said, pulling the creased and now soiled envelope from his pocket and regarding it with a deepening frown. He felt for a moment like tearing it to shreds and out of existence. But there it was—and it belonged to his father . . . .

He peeked cautiously from behind the trunk. The thin gray smoke from the chimney, which connected with the stove where Philo warmed himself, was whipped from the brick tops by the gathering wind, torn in ragged scarves, and swept away into the rain. Branches creaked and raindrops thudded into the dusty road with a soft, plushy impact. In an upper window, Bart caught a glimpse of a pink sacque. Aunt Anna might be alone; Uncle Philo might be with her. There was no way of finding out, but Bart knew he must risk it.

The second tiny stone he threw resounded sharply against the window; immediately Aunt Anna pushed aside the looped white curtains and looked out. The boy waved the envelope and held it still above his head. He saw her contract her brows, then nod briskly, pointing with a finger to the back of the house. She disappeared. Cautiously he made his way in that direction, hiding inside the barn doorway until he saw her appear on the back porch. Then he ran to her and gave her the note.

He suffered while she read it. When she had finished, he saw her smile, and then her eyes drifted over it again, and she laughed a pleased, amused laugh.

"Tell your father," she said, "it's all right! You just say that to him and nothing else; you say: 'Aunt Anna told me to tell you it's all right';—and listen, my dear, you're a lamb for being so cute about it. Was your uncle cross to you? Well, never mind; come over some day soon and I'll make you and the girls some chocolate fudge."

She stooped and kissed his wet face.

§ 4

On his way home, Bart met Uncle Philo's and Aunt Anna's three girls, and with them were Felix and Ada Farnsworth. The rain was coming down now, a little less determinedly, in thin, long parallel lines, a dreary drizzle. Some of the girls had their coats over their heads, but Josephine wore only a folded newspaper as she and the small Ada scampered by, hurrying to cover. Felix, Jane, and Peggy stopped as Bart approached, and Felix was evidently anxious to converse, but Bart was in no mood to linger. He was now wet, and during the excitement of the afternoon had lost his hat, and his long, thick hair was soaked, and water ran out of it in annoying trickles down his nose and back. The gratification of having delivered his father's message had left him, and there remained only the earlier depression, the none-too-pleasant prospect of having to give Aunt Anna's message to his father: "It's all right." What did she mean by that? Bart was sure something shameful was afoot. He feared for his father, who was always getting himself into trouble and being hurt getting out of it.

"What choo doin'?" Felix called to him.

"Nothin'." Bart did not lessen his pace, but plowed along through the wet dust that was fast turning into mud.

"Say, what's your hurry?" Felix's reedy voice slid up the scale to a treble squeak.

"None of your business," Bart answered sourly.

"Oh, it's none of my business—none of my business—none of my business," the other chanted, gesturing with the words in a ridiculous fashion. Five-year-old Peggy threw back her pretty baby face and laughed in delight.

"Ohhhh—Fe-licks—you're so fun-ny!"

It annoyed Bart, and he betrayed himself in a scowl, as he plunged on, his bare head bent to the rain.

"Oh, it's none of my business—none of my business," sang Felix, dancing now to the words. Peggy's childish laughter, running up and down the scale, sounded like an octave of bells in the falling rain. Bert turned on his heel to face the teaser.

"I'll knock your darned head off," he said menacingly, his hands doubling. Felix was too much enthralled by his admirer to desist; he went capering about like a butterfly, waving his arms.

"Oh, it's none of my business—none of my business—none of my business . . . ."

Peggy's laughs were becoming forced now. The humor of the performance had passed, and the little girl's gayety had become shrilly unpleasant. Bart glowered at his cousin for one threatening moment, then decided that a fight was too much trouble; he turned about and once more started in the direction of home.

But Felix was not content to end the situation. His audience was too precious; he felt urged to awaken it to new wonder and amusement.

"Oh, it's none of my business—none of my business . . . ."

His voice rose to a yell that reached the retreating figure. Still meeting with no success, he flung after Bart a taunt, a dreadful phrase, which referred to a certain early weakness the boy had long outgrown. Felix was a year younger than his cousin, and knew nothing of the failing to which he now glibly referred. He had heard Jack and Gill, or perhaps it had been Josh, use the expression, and it had stuck in his memory. There was no longer any justification for the gibe, but that this younger, punier, inconsequential child should dare to make use of it was for Bart breath-taking in its audacity.

He stopped as though he had been hit, swung about, this time with a deadly light in his eye, and, his hands fisted and swinging low at his sides, went straight for his tormentor. As he approached, he held himself in readiness to spring into a run, for he expected Felix to take to his heels, but feminine admiration was still strong for the smaller boy, and he stood his ground, though his smirking face had quickly lengthened to sobriety.

Their eyes intent, the two boys glared at each other in the rain, and in a moment Bart's fist would have found young Felix's face. But there was intervention. Jane, fluffy-haired, blue-eyed Jane, who to-day had an old rubber hat tied round her curls, and who had been a silent spectator throughout the scene, now thrust herself between the combatants. She was eight, and had firm round legs, square rough hands, and acted and talked, Bart had always thought, more like a boy than a girl. She wasted no time on Felix Farnsworth.

"Bart," she cried; "Bart!" she insisted.

She pushed him so hard he was obliged to give ground.

"Listen to me! *Will* you listen? Bart!"

She made him give her his attention, and when she had his eyes, pushed him before her, caught him by the arm, and dragged him away.

"Don't you be silly, Bart. He's only a baby; what do you want to fight him for? Aunt Gertrude will raise the most awful row, and you'd probably get a licking. You don't care what he says, and you'll be awfully sorry afterwards . . . ."

She went on talking earnestly, giving him no opportunity to interrupt, but all the time drawing him farther and farther up the road. He did not hear all she was saying; his attention was caught by the unusual interest she displayed, her earnestness about it all, and the funny way the raindrops clung to her hair like daubs of glue twinkling in her curls.

It came to him that he had always liked Jane, and in that moment he decided Jane was "all right."

Gruffly he demanded:

"Do *you* want me to leave that kid alone?"

"You'll be sorry for it if you don't. You know how awfully cranky Aunt Gertrude is about her children, and she's sure to tell your mother an' father—an' he's younger than you, and a whole lot littler——"

"Say," he said, "I asked you: Jew want me to leave that kid alone?"

"Why, yes, of course."

"All right, then I will."

He wheeled sharply and left her without word or glance. Hands doubled tightly and thrust deep inside the pockets of his wet overalls, he strode away, gritting his teeth, rolling his head, and kicking savagely into the thick, pasty mud that had now begun to cover the road, splashing himself recklessly, so that spatters struck his face.

§ 5

A fortnight later, he accompanied Jane home from school. Thanksgiving vacation had come and gone, and Bart remembered afterwards that on that particular afternoon he and she had been talking about Christmas presents, and she had told him she was making lavender sticks for her mother and all her aunts.

Since the day he had met her on the road, he realized he liked her better than he had ever done, though she had always been more of a favorite with him than his other cousins. There was no sentimentality connected with this interest in Jane, at least, none of which he was conscious. He had no desire to kiss her, put his arm around her, or talk to her of anything save outside things. At the same time he avoided being seen with her; he shrank at the thought that any of his brothers or acquaintances should think he was "mashed" on her. He was in his heart a little ashamed of the attraction she held for him. Goodness, Jane was nothing but a girl! He, Bart—it was true!—liked to play with a girl! He would have died rather than have had anyone suspect it.

When school was over, he enjoyed going home with her and climbing up into the hayloft of her father's barn to regale her with lengthy stories about himself. They were extravagant tales of knights, princes, and doughty warriors, which he had picked up here and there from various books and now retold, strangely distorted. Invariably they became records of his own prowess and achievements. Jane understood perfectly he was inventing them, and she understood equally well that in describing himself always as their hero, he had no exalted opinion of himself, nor any intention of trying to impress her. It was easy for him to tell his stories that way; that was all.

Bart loved the atmosphere of the loft. It was half full of bales of hay, clean but dusty, which held for him the fragrance of stubble fields in summer-time with the sun pouring down, warm and comforting. There was also the smell of apples in the loft; trays of them stood in a corner to ripen during the winter, and every once in a while, Jane and one of her sisters would be sent up there to sort them over and pick out the decaying ones. At the far, cobwebby end of the loft, to which only a little light filtered, were a few dusty ironbound trunks, some old stiff harness, one or two empty picture frames, and a stack of seatless chairs. The place was full of romance for the boy, and he liked nothing better than to climb up on a bale close under the rafters, an apple beside him on which to munch between yarns, his knees drawn up, his hands locked about them, while his imagination roamed into realms of glory in which he always shone to advantage, conscious, the while, of the round-eyed little girl who sat staring at him, her palms cupped about her cheeks, drinking in everything he said.

He liked it best when rain pelted down upon the roof, and sometimes swelled into a roar, and made it seem as if the shingles might be torn away. But on this particular day in December it was far from raining. The sunshine was like June, warm and balmy. The children had even found the loft uncomfortably hot, and Bart had pushed aside the sliding door which hung suspended at one end of it. He had no more than accomplished this and found a seat upon the threshold of the aperture, his legs dangling outside, than, with a splash of mud and the sloshing sound of galloping hooves, Philo Carter wheeled his horse into the yard and drew up directly beneath Bart's hanging heels.

Since the Sunday afternoon when the boy had called to deliver the note from his father to Aunt Anna, Bart had not seen his uncle; now, as the rider stopped, he made neither sound nor movement, cautioning Jane against the same. From their vantage point, the boy and girl looked directly down upon him. It was apparent a worry of some kind possessed the man; he did not dismount, but sat in his saddle, quieting the fidgeting horse in low, distracted tones. Bart could see that he was looking for something; he kept peering into the stalls of the wagon shed, and behind him into the dark recesses of the barn, but it was clear he was disappointed in not finding what he sought. Presently, he walked his horse to the fence, and inspected the road, then slowly returned, to stop again beneath the watching children. Bart could feel the thump of his heart, and the fan of Jane's breath upon his cheek.

Between the stable door and the wagon shed was an area of half-dried, black, churned mud. It was honeycombed with the imprint of many hooves, and Bart noticed that Philo was studying the black mold with close scrutiny, leaning over his horse's neck, first on one side, then on the other. Suddenly, with an exclamation, he jumped to the ground and picked out of the clinging mud a bright disk of silver. He rubbed it clean with his fingers, turned it over in his palm, closely examining it—a shining dollar bound with a fine band of gold. It was Captain Dan's "lucky piece," the coin Porter Farnsworth had given him on the evening of the anniversary dinner. Just as Bart's father had done, Philo spun it now and dropped it into his pocket. He raised his eyes then to the upper windows of his house, and, after a moment's contemplation, with a quick motion wrapped the reins of his horse about a nail in the barn wall and strode across the yard, his spurs clinking. Straight to the garden gate he went, straight up the three little steps before the door, and straight into the house. Bart saw him go, and fear of impending disaster filled his soul.

His interest in his companion and the afternoon faded; there was nothing to do but wait, and watch for his uncle's reappearance. The fretful horse, tethered below, promised it would not be long. The boy's eyes sought the upper windows of the house, but, behind the looped muslin curtains, there was not a sign to give him a clue to what was passing there.

"Go on, Bart, tell me a story. Tell that one about when you're Beric and are captured by the Romans and have to fight all the lions in the arena; go on, tell me that one. I like that."

"Can't to-day, Jane. I don't feel like it, somehow. . . . . Say, do you know whether your mother's at home?"

"Oh, I *think* she is; she's usually at home. . . . . Please, Bart, tell a story. Go on with the one you were telling yesterday where all the bandits are together, and it got so cold their voices froze, and you were the great detective and found out all about their plot when it got warmer and their voices thawed out. You never finished it, remember?"

"Aw, Jane, please; I can't to-day . . . . I'm feeling rotten . . . ."

"Then I won't stay up here. I'll go into the house."

"Aw, shucks, Jane, that isn't very nice—just because I don't feel good. . . . . *Cheese* it, Jane! Here's your pa."

The front door jerked open. Philo came out, and it was apparent he was very much excited. A rifle in his hand, his soft-brimmed hat pulled down over his eyes, with great strides he crossed the muddy yard, freed his horse's reins with an angry pull, and swung himself into the saddle. In plunging leaps, he cleared the enclosure, swept out of the yard, out into the puddled road, and disappeared in a spray of muddy water and flying black mire.

A dreadful silence settled upon the boggy yard, the house, and all about it.

"Oh—oh—oh!" Bart thought. "Maybe he's killed her!"

No time now to bandy words.

"You stay here," he ordered Jane; "I'm going over to your home. I got—got to see your mother. You stay here, y'understand? and when I come back I'll tell you a story."

Seizing the rope by which the hay bales were hoisted to the loft, he lowered himself hand under hand to the ground. He felt he should not run, but he could not help it.

Pushing open the front door, he looked in. It was almost black inside, and the house gave him a sense of emptiness. He hesitated, but a noise from the second story reassured him.

"Aunt Anna!"

"Who's there?" A sharp, alarmed question.

"It's me—it's Bart Carter."

The boy thought he heard a gasp; then:

"Mother of God! A messenger from Heaven! . . . . Oh, my dear, my dear, come up here—come right up here. God be thanked, you may save us all! Quick—hurry, hurry. Listen, Bart, listen to what I tell you! Take this to your father; find him no matter where he is; give it to him, and see that he reads it at once. . . . . And, oh, Bart, run, run for all you're worth!"

While she was speaking, she had scribbled the message. The envelope she did not wait to address, but thrust the sheet into it, licked its flap, and pressed it into Bart's hand. Then, seizing him, she almost dragged him down the narrow stairs, flung open the door, and shoved him through it with such a push he stumbled and nearly fell. Without a look behind him, without a glance toward the barn to see if Jane was watching there, Bart ran—ran as fast as his legs would carry him, ran with all his might, splashing through the mud, panting, gasping, the saliva in his mouth growing thick, and a pain like a pinch of sharp pinchers in his side—ran on and on, ever measuring the distance that lay between him and the oak trees that marked his home.

§ 6

More than an hour later, he came upon his father beside the irrigating ditch. With him were his brother Stephen and his foreman, old Anthony Rodoni.

It was Luey-Nuey who had directed the boy; Bart, fortunately, had encountered the silent, slanting-eyed Mongolian, with his wrinkled, withered, and impassive face, just as he was beginning to fear he was to find no one who could tell him where his father was to be found. The house had never seemed so utterly deserted. Even Camilla and Tilly, whom the boy had confidently expected to find in their favorite corner behind the screen of mattress vine on the veranda, were not there to-day; Matea informed him his mother and sisters had departed to do some Christmas shopping in Guadalupe. There was no sign of his brothers, young Tony Rodoni was not to be found, and the men's quarters were empty. The leisureliness of a sleepy cat sedately maneuvering across the porch so irritated Bart that, in his state of tenseness, he kicked the animal angrily from his path.

"I t'ink um il-ligating ditch," Luey-Nuey had observed, opening one leather-covered eye for an instant to let the glittering black pupil behind it shine forth.

"Sure?" inquired the harassed boy. "Are you *sure,* Luey-Nuey?"

But the old Chinaman was displeased by the boy's doubt, and at once shuffled away with an indifferent lift of the shoulder.

There had been nothing for it but to try the irrigating ditch, and Bart could only hazard a guess as to the spot in its devious course at which he was likely to find his father. He had hardly set out when a distant boom directed him, and he remembered then having heard some of the men say they were going to blast that afternoon. It was a mile or more across soggy fields and through tangled weeds before Bart came to the group that stood upon the bank watching a gang of Mexicans deepening the trench below.

The ditch building was in its most difficult phase of construction. The course of its channel lay directly at right angles across an outcropping of bituminous shale, a barricade some six hundred yards in width; through this wall a passageway had to be blown with dynamite and hewn out with pick and crowbar. Progress had been dishearteningly slow. For more than two years, Bart knew, men had been working summers and at odd months during that time to pierce this barrier of rock, and he knew, too, that the end of the job was at last in sight, that his father and uncle had high hopes of bringing the waters of Guadalupe Meadows to their new orchards before the next hot weather arrived.

As the boy approached, they were ready to blast again. Anthony Rodoni was ordering the men out of the ditch when suddenly his words were drowned by a terrific detonation. A spattering of flying stone and dirt followed, and a section of the bank some twenty feet from where Bart was standing slid into the excavation. Shouts and billows of dust arose. Bart saw his father leap into the ditch, and as he ran to the edge of the bank and looked down, he saw the Captain tugging at the legs of a man whose body was completely covered by the slide of dirt and shale.

"Capt'n—Capt'n! For God's sake . . . ."

". . . . second charge coming . . . ."

"Look out there, Captain . . . . number two blast! . . . . *Christ!*"

BOOM! There came another upheaval—a fountain of rock and earth sprang upward, bits of timber somersaulted in the air, and another section of loose bank caved in. Dust obscured the scene for a long moment; when it cleared, Bart saw his father again, this time waist deep in shale, his hat gone, his hair standing in wisps from his head, his face spattered with particles of dirt, a wriggle of blood trickling down his forehead.

"By dun," the Captain roared, "lend a hand here—Steve, *Steve!* Get those greasers moving—Rodoni, come down here! Jumping Judas, *move*, can't yer? This fellow'll die if we don't get him out."

There was a rush to his aid. No room to wield a shovel or a pick; the shale was loose, and the men tore at it with their fingers; rocks flew, dirt was scooped away by handfuls; the furiously working crowd made Bart think of a pack of dogs burrowing in the sand. The hole deepened, and in a minute or two, the Captain was so far uncovered that, with a wrench, he freed his feet from their entanglement. Planting them as firmly as he could upon the loose and crumbling shale, with a terrific tug he dragged the buried man clear of the mound of débris that covered him.

The Mexican was unconscious; the first blast had only stunned him, but he would have been suffocated beneath the weight of rock and earth of the second blast had it not been for the Captain's prompt and heroic action. Half the contents of a canteen of water made him open his eyes, and Stephen tossed down a whisky flask to Rodoni, who was tending him.

"He's all right," the Captain pronounced, as he scrambled up the bank and stood once more beside his brother. He beat the dirt from his clothes and dusted his hands. Bart tugged at his sleeve.

"Pa," the boy said.

His father gave no heed; he did not see him.

"That was a big risk you took, Dan," his brother told him, with a grave shake of the head.

"Well, the dum fool didn't get out of the way; he was stuck down there. I could see what was coming."

"Blasta—dey prime' wrong! Dam' fool feexa de prime' wrong!" Rodoni called up from the ditch.

"Pa—pa!" Bart insisted, tugging at his sleeve.

The Captain turned upon him, scowling under bunched brows.

"What d'you want? What you doin' 'round here?"

The boy held out the crumpled envelope. His father's face lightened a little; he took the letter and was about to put it in an upper side pocket of his vest when Bart jerked his sleeve.

"No," the boy said; "you can't do that; you got to read it now."

His father frowned again and burst the flap with a thick finger. He glanced over the scrawled words, and Bart, watching, saw no muscle of his face change. Very deliberately the Captain folded the paper over twice, slowly tore it into small bits, and scattered them to the wind. As he did so, he turned to his brother and foreman, interjected a remark into their discussion, and fell into step with them to walk the two or three hundred yards to where their horses had been tied, out of frightening distance. Bart started to retrace his journey home when his father called him.

"Hey, you, Bart! . . . . Come back here; we'll ride you in. You can take him up with you, can't you, Tony?"

"Sure," agreed the foreman; "I giva heem lift."

Bart limped after the three men. His feet were sore, and he was very tired. When they reached the animals, Rodoni mounted, bent down from his saddle, picked the boy up with a long arm, and settled him upon the pummel in front of him.

At an easy canter, they all loped homeward, talking of the ditch and problems which still faced them.

"Rain come by and by, Capt'n," old Tony said; "eef she don' come disa week—maybe ten day, I feenish an' lay off de gang 'til spring come."

"Did you try any water in the flume last week?"

"Well-a no good. She beena workin' all righ' up to now."

"Send a man up to La Canada if we get any bad weather these next few weeks, and have him take a look around. We might get snow up there."

"How d'you explain that blast going off too soon, Tony?" called Stephen over the head of his brother, who rode between him and the foreman.

"Barbosa—God dam'. He getta busy too soom, feexa de prime' wrong. I fire heem to-morrow."

The riders were following the wooded course of Guadalupe Creek, the Captain's horse half a length in front of the others. As Rodoni spoke, Bart thought he heard a little noise at his left over by the bank, but he did not turn to look, for he saw his father do something peculiar. He bobbed his head and commenced to lean further and further over his horse's neck, and then, quite suddenly, he tumbled to the ground.

Bart nearly followed his example as Rodoni violently drew rein, throwing his horse back upon its haunches. All three of them, Stephen, the foreman, and the boy, were about the Captain in a moment. There was no need for questions, for examination, for anything. Even Bart knew his father was dead. As his uncle turned the body over, they could see where the bullet, entering at the back of the head, had emerged just below the eye.

Stephen rose and took off his hat; old Anthony did the same. They stood looking down, and there was a long silence.

After a while, the foreman turned and looked over toward the wooded creek.

"Reckon Sanchez made good," Stephen said, noting the direction of Rodoni's glance.

"Notta Sanchez. Martinez," the foreman said simply. "Martinez talka all de time he getta heem sure. Martinez bad greaser."

Bart said nothing, but his mouth quivered, and slowly the large tears welled to his eyes and fell upon his shirt.

In that moment he knew that, as long as he lived, he would never be able to confide to anyone his suspicion as to the murderous hand that had laid his father low.

BOOK II

1900

CHAPTER I

§ I

I WISH your sister would marry me," Frank Gardiner said on a weary breath; "it's been going on ten years since we've been engaged. She keeps saying 'next year.' I'm not making very much, but the two of us could manage; it doesn't cost such a great deal to live in Gilroy ...."

He paused, and there was a long silence in the little book shop.

"I've always thought," he continued, "I'd do better in San Francisco, and if she'd only marry me, I'd move up there and try my luck. With her to help, I believe I could make a bookstore pay in the city."

Frowning, he kicked close the door of the small stove in which wood embers were still glowing, and with a gesture of disgust, tossed upon the cluttered counter the book from which he had been reading aloud to his companion.

"I suppose," Bart observed thoughtfully, "she thinks she's needed round the house. We all depend on her, you know, and Ma isn't much good these days. I really don't know how we'd get along without her, Frank. Tilly couldn't do the work, and Jo's got too many highfaluting ideas about suffrage and woman's rights. .... Besides, Camilla's the only one who can get along with Uncle Philo."

"But she's giving her life away for him and his daughters, for your mother, and her brothers and sisters—the lot of you—with never a thought for herself or her own future. Cam's twenty-seven or twenty-eight now; how long is she going to keep this up? How about me? How about herself? How about a home and children and everything? Isn't she ever going to start in living for herself?"

Bart was surprised by the heat mild Frank Gardiner put into his words. Within the last year, a friendship had sprung up between the modest book dealer and the hobbledehoy ranch boy. Bart had begun by borrowing books from him, and then, upon a certain dark, rainy Sunday night, when he had been driving him back to Gilroy after a day's visit at Los Robles, he had told him about his poetry, and Gardiner had neither laughed nor ridiculed him.

He had grown to like the man more and more as the intimacy ripened. Franklin Gardiner was a gentle sort of creature, but he knew his mind when it came to literature, and there was never any wavering uncertainty about his devotion to Camilla.

It was indeed a pity, Bart decided, that Frank and his sister could not go their way, be married, and commence living their own life together.

The boy propped his feet against the shining rod that circled the stove, let his mind wander to Los Robles, and fell to thinking of all the changes that had occurred there since Philo Carter and his three daughters had come to make the place their home. Eight years ago—eight or nine; he could not exactly remember how long ago it had been. It had happened soon after Aunt Anna died. Bart one day had heard she was sick and almost the next she was dead. He never clearly understood what had been the reason; sometimes it was said to have been typhoid, at others double pneumonia. Whatever her last illness, it was universally conceded Medcraft had arrived too late. Following her death, hardly a month had elapsed before Uncle Philo had sold the lease on his ranch and ranch-house, and had come with Josephine, Jane, and Peggy to live at Los Robles and manage the ranch for Captain Dan's widow.

Bart's feelings had been strangely mixed at these arrangements. He had been glad his three cousins were going to be in the house, but not his uncle. The affairs of the ranch had been running none too smoothly since Captain Dan's death. Stephen

Carter had tried to manage them for a year or two, but they were too much for him. He had his own interests in addition to consider. Old Anthony Rodoni, faithful and devoted though he was, was even less competent to carry out the Captain's large ideas. Rodoni had needed supervision, and when Anna Carter suddenly died, leaving her three young motherless daughters, it had seemed reasonable for Mathilda Carter to urge Philo and the girls to come to live at Los Robles, and for Philo to take charge of the ranch.

However logical it had appeared to others at the time, Bart had questioned its wisdom from the very beginning, and now, as he sat in Frank Gardiner's musty little bookstore, waiting for the train which was to bear him away to San José, he felt with no small satisfaction that much had since transpired to justify his boyish instinct.

Philo had grown to be a dark silent specter in their midst. It was true, Bart's mother relied on him, Camilla was friendly with him, Jack, for some reason Bart could not understand, cheerfully carried out his orders and was now foreman. As for the rest, Josh had departed, perhaps not directly as a result of Uncle Philo's overbearing domination, for Josh had for a long time wanted to become a doctor and go to San Francisco to study medicine. Gill unquestionably had resented his uncle's authority, and, spurred by his older brother's example, had picked up his discarded textbooks, studied into long hours of the night, and successfully passed the entrance examinations to the State University at Berkeley. He was now working his way through that institution, doing all sorts of mean jobs, so Bart heard, even waiting on table. And then there had been Eva Ann . . . .

The meditating boy scowled at the memory of his uncle's treatment of his sister—the man's inhumanity when the trembling girl had returned to tell them all that she had married young Tony Rodoni. Bart had heard the biting, cruel words, had seen Tony's dark, handsome face grow darker still beneath their lash, and Eva Ann's shaking fingers and falling tears as she had clung to her young husband. After they had taken their destinies into their own hands and gone away, Philo had vented his spleen by dismissing old Anthony, who had been ranch foreman since Martinez' time, turning him out without a day's warning.

Lastly, there had been Philo's quarrel with Stephen, that absurd and ridiculous row over the irrigating ditch which Uncle Stephen had helped his brother to build, and in which he had an interest. High words and bitter feelings had resulted in a complete estrangement between the two families; even the young girls of the respective households no longer spoke to one another.

The ranch itself, spacious, lordly Los Robles, had fared from bad to worse under Philo's management. Bart had heard the hands and the vaqueros censure him in no uncertain language, and now there was constant talk of hard times in the house. These, however, could not be wholly laid at Philo's door. Two years ago, the dreaded, fatal anthrax had made its appearance among the cattle, and a third of the herd had been swept away. The previous year and the present one had seen more hundreds carried off.

While Bart could not blame his uncle entirely for the evil days which had come upon them, he believed, none the less, Philo was a bad manager. He had not the driving power, leadership, nor far-sightedness of Captain Dan. Philo's interest lay in cattle, and Bart knew his father had been turning away from that industry and coming more and more to believe in fruit. The boy was free with his criticisms to the more intimate members of the family, and Philo knew of them. Always there lurked in Bart's mind the dark suspicion it had been Philo who had sped the bullet on its way that ended his father's life, and he sometimes fancied his uncle had an inkling of his thoughts. With the death of Anna, the man had grown increasingly dark, brooding, and silent. When he spoke at all, too frequently it was to make Bart the butt of his sarcasm and rebuke.

If it had not been for Jane, with her blue eyes and golden hair, Bart, thinking of these matters and gazing at the cracked and blackened isinglass in the stove door through which glowed the dying fire, decided that long ago he would have shaken the dust of Los Robles from his feet. Jane! . . . . Ah, well, he could not bring himself to leave Jane, and there was no way he could take her with him. Not yet, at any rate. Before long, he must somehow make his escape and begin life elsewhere for himself.

"Frank," he asked abruptly, "how did you get your start? Whatever made you pick out Gilroy and think of opening a bookstore in this jay town?"

He eyed his friend critically as he listened to the tale, already partly familiar, of orphanage in the wind-swept, prairie town of Ogallala, the patronage of the local priest, the trip to California to visit an uncle and rid himself of a hacking cough, the death of this relative, who had owned a small fruit ranch in the vicinity, and the young man's decision to remain in Gilroy and establish there a little bookshop, "The Browse Around," with the few hundred dollars the sale of his uncle's property had brought him.

"And you've been here ten years?"

"More than that; it's nearly twelve now."

Bart continued to regard him: unruly, tousled hair, a thin, cadaverous face, glasses with thick lenses, a sensitive mouth, white teeth, and fine, long, nervous hands—likable, gentle, and inefficient. He was several years Bart's senior, yet in many ways the nineteen-year-old felt himself the more experienced of the two. Bart could appreciate the qualities that had captured Camilla's fancy. He was drawn to Frank, himself, and admired him too, for all he knew about books and writers. He was the only person in whom Bart had ever felt free to confide, the only one to whom he was willing to speak about himself, his perplexing thoughts, his vague theories of life, and his eager hope to express himself some day in prose and poetry. Generally once, often twice a week, the boy had made the long trip from Carterville to Gilroy to sit and talk with Frank, or listen to him read aloud from some modern author whose new book had just been received. Occasionally, and shyly, he would sometimes leave behind him an effort of his own for perusal and criticism, and frequently Frank had a word of high praise for these effusions. Even Jane knew nothing about them, although the sonnets, which Bart dared attempt now and then, all traced their inspiration to her. He could not talk to anyone else about their secret scribbling. Only to a diary, in which late every night he wrote a garbled record of his comings and goings, and to this gentle sympathetic friend in Gilroy, could he disentangle his thoughts and bare his heart.

His musings were interrupted by the distant wail of a locomotive, which brought him abruptly to his feet.

"Well, Frank, there's my train. I wouldn't worry about Cam. Something's bound to happen over there, sooner or later. If my mother should die, the family'd break up, I'm sure, and leave Uncle Philo to run the place as he pleases. I can't stand it there myself much longer. Gosh, I wish you and Cam *would* get married, move up to San Francisco, and let me come to live with you. I'd work my head off—sweep floors, wash windows, dust the books, and wait on customers, do anything you'd let me. . . . . There she is at the crossing, now; I'll have to hurry. Thanks awfully for what you said about that little story; I'll try to write it over again; it isn't much of anything, you know; I just wanted to see what I could do. I'll be down Thursday. So long."

As he talked, Bart struggled into the shabby overcoat, caught up his hat and straw telescope valise. Then, with a wave of his hand, he flung open the flimsy glass-paneled door and bolted down the street to the station, which he reached just as the northbound train came to a stop beside it.

§ 2

An hour later, he descended at San José, boarded a trolley marked "Santa Clara," changed at a junction, and twenty minutes later abandoned the car in turn at a cluster of tin mail boxes beside the track. Toward five o'clock in the afternoon, after a long day of traveling, he began the slow climb of three-and-a-half miles up the steadily ascending road leading to the small fruit ranch in the hills where his sister Eva Ann and Tony Rodoni lived.

It was the early spring of the year, and down in the valley, as the trolley had sped past flat orchard lands, Bart had noticed that the first of the white prune blossoms were beginning to show themselves. The ground was soft and spongy from rain, while the air was sharply cold, heavy with moisture, and filled with the lush smell of damp undergrowth and freshly turned soil.

As he plodded his way up the rutted road the orderly orchards with their neat, serried ranks of trees presently gave place to the thick, leafy jungle of the uplands. A creek foamed and plunged over a dam; redwoods, manzanita, and buck-eyes closely lined its borders, with now and then luxurious beds of woodwardias curving gracefully over the bubbling course. In the underbrush there was a faint stirring of unseen life, but despite the gentle rustling in the leaves and the babble of the churning creek, a vast silence seemed to fill the woods.

Bart trudged steadily upward, pausing frequently to change his straw valise from one hand to the other. He passed a deserted quarry, and an old red barn tumbling to decay. From behind a sagging fence in a clearing next to the road, a shaggy white horse regarded him out of a roving eye, snorted suspiciously, and galloped away across the soggy field, flinging up behind him great clods of earth as he fled. A lumber wagon, piled high with freshly felled logs, its brakes shrieking their complaint, slid heavily past him down the steep descent. In the shadows where the winding road cut into the bank, the cold was sharp, and here and there in the ruts and along the outer edges, white rinds of frost still lingered, untouched by the day's warmth. But upon the crest and shoulders of hills across the canyon, where the purple chaparral grew thickly, the late afternoon sun shone brightly with kind caress.

At a wineshop beside a stone bridge, Bart stopped to inquire his way and to drink gratefully and to its dregs a tall thick glass of lager beer. Refreshed, he continued his climb, and ten minutes later came upon the edge of an orchard lying precipitously upon a hillside. In an unkempt clearing some hundred feet back from the road stood a ramshackle, dilapidated whitewashed house which instinctively he knew to be the place he sought.

A lumpy furrowed road led up to the building through a wide gap in a broken fence. Before its doorway lay what appeared to be a huddle of junk: a weed-cutter on its side, a tangled roll of barbed wire, a clump of smudge pots for early frosts, a jumbled pile of empty fruit boxes, and a stack of drying trays. About these, pecking at the hard ground, straggled a few scrawny chickens, and from the rear, where a tumbledown barn opened its sagging doors, came strongly the aromatic smell of cows and fresh manure. As Bart hesitated to approach, a black, woolly-coated dog charged precipitously down upon him, barking furiously.

"Here you, quiet there." Bart spoke to him with the ease of a ranch-man accustomed to dogs.

A woman came out on the unrailed stoop before the house, a fat, bow-legged baby toddling after her, grasping her skirts. She shielded her eyes with a bare forearm and peered at the figure in the road.

"Hello, Eva Ann," Bart called. He hurried up the steep bit of road, ignoring the dog, and in a moment had his sister in his arms, was hugging her, kissing her smooth brown hair that smelled of smoke and cookery.

"Oh, Bart—Bart—Bart!" she cried on an almost hysterical breath. "How good of you! I'm so glad—so awfully, awfully glad! How's Ma and Trudie and the family? All well? Tony'll be *so* pleased you're here. He's plowing this afternoon in the upper orchard, but he'll be down directly the light fades. Oh, my dear . . . ." She broke off to hold him at arm's length and to regard him with glowing eyes.

Grinning, he returned her look. He had not seen her for two years, and he thought she appeared both pale and tired; she was large with child, but seemed well and happy. He could detect in her very little trace of the gentle-mannered, soft-voiced, round-eyed little girl with whom he had loved to play, and who, among all the children, had been his father's favorite. The round eyes were hers still, but they belonged now to a woman who had suffered, who had come to love deeply, and had experienced both pain and joy. Wisps of loosened hair hung about her ears, and the waist of her dress was stained and spotted. She saw her brother's glance and apologized, sweeping the strands of wayward hair into place with quick, smoothing strokes of her hands.

"You mustn't mind finding me looking like this, Bart dear. I've been doing up some of the baby's things this afternoon, and I'm in the midst of Tony's dinner. He has an enormous appetite when he's been plowing all day. . . . . But you haven't seen the children yet! This, my dear," she said proudly, catching up with a strong heave the fat, brown, waddling child at her knee, "is your niece Antonia—Miss Antonia Angelica Rodoni, no less, aged two years and three months. She needs her face washed and a clean romper, but I haven't had a moment. And in here," continued Eva Ann, leading the way into the house and opening a door, "is my bad, bad boy, Danny, who gives his mother no end of worry by refusing to get well and *stay* well."

She bent over a tumbled bed and lifted in her arms a dark-faced, staring-eyed baby about a year old, in whose pinched and weazened features Bart recognized a ridiculous caricature of Tony. The child commenced to whimper, and, patting his small rear as he nestled against her shoulder, Eva Ann bore him into the warm smoking kitchen at the back of the house to which Bart followed her.

"It isn't time for his bottle yet," she explained, placing one filled with milk into a deep saucepan of warm water on the kerosene stove and turning up the flame beneath it, "but his dinner will put him off to sleep, and I hate to have him yelling when his father comes in. . . . . Sh—sh—sh—sh," she soothed, jogging the baby gently up and down in the crook of her arm. "I don't know what's wrong with him," she said to Bart; "I think it's his stomach. He keeps spitting-up all the time, and he cries half the night. Poor Tony never gets any sleep."

Bart sympathetically watched her, as she stood before the flimsy oil-stove, pushing pots and saucepans about upon the scanty surface of its three-burner top, the sickly child wailing in her arms, the older one at her feet, grasping her skirt. Once again he tried to see in this harassed and tired woman, some vestige of the gentle little girl who had run up and down stairs at Los Robles, tripped laughingly in and out of the house, ever been ready to dash away on somebody's errand. He remembered the lovely picture she had been with her sweet young face alight with its starry look of wonder and ecstasy, when the dark-skinned, handsome Italian boy, who had grown up in their midst and been almost like one of themselves, had come whispering to her of love, pleading his suit, and had swept her from her feet into his arms, crushing down her scruples and her hesitancy with his eager young kisses, and had finally carried her off to San José to marry her before a Justice of the Peace.

He recalled, too, the anxious day when they had found her missing, his mother silently weeping and praying, his uncle sending him flying to Guadalupe to notify Sheriff Cook, all Carterville roused and agitated by the news, and how plans for searching parties had been afoot when young Tony Rodoni—whose absence had never once been connected with the girl's disappearance—had brought her back, unheralded, into their midst and announced, proudly, she was his wife. Whatever doubts and misgivings Eva Ann may have experienced after the knot that bound her to him had been tied, however she may have repented her runaway and un-Catholic marriage, she had returned to her home believing in her simple, gentle heart that all would see her young bronze god in the same light that she did, and that her mother and the family would forgive and welcome them. But neither she nor Tony had been prepared for the storm that had broken over their heads. For days Bart had beheld his sister weeping, his mother weeping, Camilla and Tilly going about the house with tear-stained faces; for days he had observed the scowling looks old Anthony had cast his son; for days he had watched his brothers' dark, resentful faces, even his three young cousins' reproachful glances, and finally he had been a witness to the ugly scene in which Uncle Philo had viciously spoken his mind.

Mathilda had insisted the couple be remarried by a priest, had unceremoniously separated Eva Ann from Tony permitting no communication between them until a proper wedding might take place, and when this was finally accomplished, it was amid the tears of the women and the black looks of the men.

For a few weeks longer the unhappy young bride and groom had lived on at Los Robles, occupying the foreman's cottage under the drooping line of eucalyptus trees, Tony's father moving into one of the laborers' shacks close by. But it soon became apparent, to themselves, at least, that there was no health in the arrangement. Mathilda continued to mope and grieve, Philo was frankly hostile, old Anthony surly and unsympathetic.

One day Tony's father came to him and spoke of a small ranch he owned in the Santa Clara foothills—a rugged, inaccessible place where there were some acres of pears, a few fields, and a languishing vineyard, leased for some years past to a Portuguese family, but now untenanted. He urged his son to go there, take his wife with him, live to themselves, and wrest from the ungracious soil the best existence they were able. Tony and Eva Ann had not hesitated; there had been a brief, distressing farewell, and Bart had driven them over to the train at Gilroy, had given them seven dollars, all the money he possessed, and Frank Gardiner had loaned them sixty more.

In the year that ensued it was inevitable that some sort of reconciliation should take place. When Eva Ann's first baby was born in a hospital at San José, her mother and older sister had gone to see her there. A few weeks later, she brought her dark-eyed Antonia to Los Robles for a month's visit. But Tony hated his wife's family and would have nothing to do with them. Only for Bart had he any liking.

Three years rolled by. Eva Ann was twenty-two now, and had lived a hard life in the hills, fighting a daily struggle for existence, where, for all the soft, glorious sunshiny months of May to November, it was bitter cold in winter and dripping wet in spring, where fuel for heat had to be chopped with an ax, where every drop of water for washing or drinking had to be drawn from a well, where all the cooking had to be done on a coal-oil stove, and all the light furnished by lamps, where supplies of staple articles must be hauled up the road twice a week from Cupertino, five miles away.

A wave of admiration for his sister swept over Bart. He saw the sewing machine in a corner, littered with scraps of cloth and basting threads, he saw the washtub in the kitchen, half full of cold soapy water, he saw the blocks and broken playthings, the odds and ends of clothing strewn over the floor of the one decent-sized room, which tired hands and an aching back had been too weary to pick up and put away. He noted too the plain pine-topped table, stained with grease spots, upon which but one place had been set, marked by knife, fork, spoon, and cup. There was no napkin, and no seat for a companion.

But as soon as the red gums of the wailing baby had closed in silence upon the nipple of the warmed milk bottle, and Bart had taken his nephew in his arms to establish himself, cautiously, in a sagging rocker by the window, Eva Ann, moving clumsily and heavily between kitchen and living room, busied herself in adding more knives, forks, and spoons to the table and setting two additional places.

Her chatter with Bart was presently interrupted by the sharp barking of the dog outside. With clanking chains and traces dragging, a team of horses trailed past the house, Tony Rodoni bringing up the rear, reins in hand. Some minutes later he came in through the back door, carrying a fruit box filled with kindling and some chunks of wood.

"Why, *hello,* Bart!"

He dropped his burden with a loud thump upon the floor and, smiling broadly, crossed the room to grasp the visitor by the hand. He was still handsome, Bart observed, swarthy, black-haired, with a dark bronzed skin; and in spite of his present unkempt hairiness and grime, it was obvious he had retained much of the winning grace and good-nature which had characterized him as a boy. He was full-grown now, strong, broad, deep-chested. To-night he was dusty and dirty, and his long, matted, sweat-stained hair clung to his neck, and around his ears, while a week's growth of unshaven beard covered his chin. He affectionately embraced his wife, kissed the small girl, and hurried out through the kitchen to the back porch, where in a moment or two he was heard sloppily washing himself.

The two men sat down presently at the table, and Eva Ann brought them plates heaped with chunks of pale beef, covered with thick pale gravy, flanked by boiled potatoes; there were also canned corn, sliced bread, tea, and a large dish of stewed prunes. Tony set a demijohn of claret on the floor at his feet and filled his glass from it several times, railing at Bart for not keeping pace with him.

He ate generously, the guest noticed, and none too silently, laughing and talking the while with his mouth full, and when he had cleaned his plate, begged his wife for another helping. When he was satisfied, he pulled out his pipe, filled and lighted it, pressing down the burning tobacco leisurely with a bare thumb. All the time he talked—of the weather, of grafting with which he was experimenting, the conditions of the road, politics and crops—gesticulating as he leaned backward in his tilted chair, waving his pipe and blowing thick plumes of smoke from his nostrils.

Eva Ann meanwhile gathered up the dishes, carried them to the kitchen, and was busy there for a time, clattering pans and rattling cutlery and china. The baby fell asleep in the sagging rocker; he had toppled over on his side, his mouth was open, and a long drool of saliva hung from his lip. Antonia busied herself with her blocks and broken playthings, but presently there broke from her a loud wail; she had cut her finger on the sharp edge of a tin car of her train. Tony scooped her up, sat her on his knee, sucked the small finger, and went on talking, patting her shoulder till the whimpering subsided.

"Well, what do you think of the outfit?" he asked, his own eyes sweeping the bare walls of the room.

Bart murmured an inarticulate answer.

"It's been pretty tough going up here at times," the man continued, laying aside his pipe as he noticed the smoke annoyed his daughter. "This little old place wasn't worth much of anything when we came up here, but I had one of the Portuguese to help me, and I cleared about twenty acres back up the hill, and I've staked out a little old vineyard up there. There's a lot of money in grapes, you know. They grow well on a hillside."

"Don't you have to irrigate?" Bart asked, to show interest.

"Not up here. Vines and trees get along without it, somehow. I have my eye on a piece across the road. Make a fine pasture, and there's another little old acre and a half a fellow has up the way a bit——"

"You'd better see about raising money to pay your first instalment of taxes before you talk about buying other people's property," Eva Ann said lightly, bringing in a lamp and setting it on the table.

"Oh, there won't be any trouble about that," Tony replied. "We'll get the money somehow. That fellow will lend us something on the next pear crop. Going to be good this year."

"But what about fixing the roof, and building on another room, and having money in the bank for the new little baby in May?"

She said it all easily, pressing her cheek against the rough mat of his hair.

"He's always talking about the craziest things," she added to Bart: "buying more land, getting a pump, hiring a man——"

"Now—now," her husband protested, "I don't do any such thing. That pump's something we can't get along without."

Bart's eyes followed his sister as she went heavily about the room, pulling down a ragged shade or two on the side of the house facing the road, gathering up a garment, dropping a chunk of wood into the stove. He jumped to her assistance as she attempted to stand upon a chair to light a lamp that hung from the ceiling. Tony apparently was oblivious of all this. He sat comfortably smoking his pipe once more, Antonia having crawled away. It was not, Bart saw, that he was indifferent; he was just unobservant.

Eva Ann lifted the sleeping baby gently and carried him off to bed, and, after what seemed a long succession of other petty duties, came finally to sit with her husband and brother, sinking gratefully into the rocker beside them.

"Bart, I'm going to put you out here for the night on a mattress we keep stowed away in the barn. I hope you'll be comfortable; we haven't another room, you know, nor another bed."

"Oh, sure, Sis; that'll be all right."

"Tony dear, I'm sorry, but I'll have to ask you to get the mattress for me. It's rolled up, back of the rafter, you know, behind the hayrick."

Her husband cast her a frown, cocked an eyebrow, and, with a careless shrug, rose and left the room.

"Dear old Tony," Eva Ann remarked, reading her brother's mind; "he isn't much good round the house, but he's a perfect wonder outside.

"Oh, we'll get along," she continued; "things are a lot better than they used to be, and the price of fruit's going up, Tony says. He's planted another twenty acres to grapes and expects to make heaps of money out of them. The only real sorrow I have is that I don't get to church very often, and it's so far for Father Giuseppe . . . ."

The mattress was deposited on the floor, and Bart insisted upon spreading his own sheets and blankets. Tony fell asleep in his chair, and Antonia followed suit, her black tangled curls resting on a corner of the makeshift bed. For another hour

Eva Ann and Bart talked on, undisturbed by Tony's snores.

She roused her husband and her daughter, then. The man went blundering into his room, and a moment later Bart heard his heavy shoes hit the floor, and almost immediately the squeak and groan of bed springs. Eva Ann gathered up the sleepy child, kissed her brother affectionately, and left him to put out the lamps.

Bart soon was huddled beneath damp covers, but it was some time before he felt warm. He lay staring up into the darkness, watching the light that escaped through chinks in the stove, wavering on walls and ceiling. From the adjoining room came the steady guttural rasp of Tony's snores and the sound of Eva Ann moving—moving—moving. As he drifted off to sleep the baby fretfully began to cry, and he could hear his sister's distressed and consoling murmur.

§ 3

He left them at an early hour the next morning, Eva Ann, with her small son in her arms, her daughter holding tightly to her skirts, waving to him with a dish rag from the stoop.

The day had broken gloriously, sunshine pouring in yellow pencils of dusty light through the trees, the air thrilling to the calls of quail, the pipings of larks, and the screech of blue jays. The bottom of the winding mountain road was reached all too soon. Bart found himself again beside the cluster of mail boxes, and he had time only to roll and half smoke a cigarette before the trolley bore down to carry him, bouncing and swaying, across the flat blossoming orchard lands. By ten o'clock he was in San José, and by noon had emerged from the railroad station at San Francisco, suddenly to find himself in the midst of noisy, confusing traffic, feeling weary and ill at ease, fearful of attracting attention, and looking just what he was, a hobbledehoy ranch-boy fresh from the country.

It was a year and a half since he had been in the city; Philo had sent him there then to get Uncle Porter's and Aunt Gertrude's signatures to the deed of sale of the dairy ranch. His uncle and aunt had met him at the station, taken him directly to a notary's office, signed the document, and he had left for Los Robles on the next train. He was only seventeen at that time. Now he felt immeasurably older, more experienced, and he boarded the waiting trolley to take a seat on its dummy with some measure of confidence.

Directed by the conductor, he descended at California Street, and while he waited for the cable car to come along and pick him up, the slit-eyed coolies shuffling by, and the down-at-heel, jobless men with hat brims pulled down and collars turned up, who shambled along the dingy streets so near mysterious Chinatown, all seemed to him denizens of the underworld, opium smokers, white slavers, thugs, and thieves. He breathed more easily when he was carried to quieter and brighter streets, but the precipitous hills which the cable car so easily climbed and descended sent his heart knocking into his throat.

He found without difficulty the bright dairy shop with its clean milk-and-buttery smell on Divisadero Street. After their son Charley had been carried off by "galloping consumption," Porter and Gertrude abandoned Carterville, left Philo to sell their ranch, and went to San Francisco. Gertrude had grieved terribly at the time of the boy's death. She felt in some way the community regarded it as a reflection upon her. Captain Dan had often railed at her for her way of rearing her sons, and she fancied the rest of Carterville shared his views. The air of the place became intolerable to her. To escape the accusations she imagined in the eyes of everyone she met had been the one desire of her grief-stricken heart, and so, with Felix and the two girls, she had fled to the city. Porter soon followed, and then for a long time nobody heard anything from or about them.

It was Josh who had sent news. Soon after he went to the city to enter Cooper's Medical College he had met Uncle Porter one day on the street. He and Aunt Gertrude, so the young man wrote, had opened a dairy not far from his college; they had a profitable business, the children were at school, and he himself was going to make his home with them. The basement floor of a dwelling house had been transformed into a store; white tiles and large windows made it attractive. The family lived upstairs, and there was a room on the top floor, which he, Josh, was to have for a small monthly sum. He was delighted with the arrangement. The rent was cheap, he had all the milk and eggs he could drink or eat, and the place was only six blocks from college. Any other quarters he might find which would be close to Cooper's were necessarily a long way from the night school in which he taught.

In white enamel letters arranged in semicircles on both front windows, Bart read the name: The Benign Milk & Egg Emporium. Inside he found his uncle, clad in a white jacket and apron, busying himself behind the counter.

The man did not recognize him at first, bent puzzled brows, then turned genially cordial.

"Well, well, well, Bart Carter! . . . . How's all the folks back home? Mother well? Everybody well? Philo making money? How's Stephen? Your aunt Gertrude will be glad to see you. She's upstairs with Dora; little girl's been ailing. We hardly ever see your brother, you know. Has a clinic at seven every morning, and he's out of the house before we're up; sometimes he's here for supper, but he has to dash right off for school; the Potrero's a good half hour from here. He doesn't come home until ten-thirty, and then often he has to study until two or three in the morning. Hard-working boy, that brother of yours. . . . . Well, you'd better go up and see the family; they keep me pretty busy down here. . . . . No, there's no need for your going round; use the back stairs."

Opening a door, which gave upon a narrow ascending staircase, Uncle Porter thrust his head into the dark well and shouted: "Hey, Ger—trude, somebody to see you." Then he nodded pleasantly to Bart and turned his attention to a customer.

As the boy groped his way upward, he could hear the tread of his aunt's approaching feet and her anxious, querulous tones,

"Yes? . . . . Who is it? Who *is* it, Porter? What——"

She halted abruptly when her eyes encountered Bart. She stared blankly. Recognizing him, one hand flew to her disordered hair, the other caught sharply together her flimsy sacque across her bare bosom.

"Go in the front room, there," she directed without other word of greeting. "I'll be with you in a minute."

The front room was directly over the shop. It had bay windows that bowed over the street, and was furnished stiffly with a parlor suite, a plush davenport, and six plush chairs. In the embrasure of the windows, a goldfish bowl stood upon an onyx table, and above the brown wooden mantelpiece hung a large colored photograph, framed heavily in gilt, of Bart's dead cousin. The picture had been taken when Charley was about ten years old; it depicted him in a velvet Fauntleroy suit with lace collar and cuffs, and elbow resting on the arm of a red upholstered chair, one foot negligently crossed behind the other.

Aunt Gertrude came in as Bart was looking at the photograph; both continued their upward gaze for several silent moments, the boy embarrassed as to what to say. When his aunt finally moved, he glanced sideways at her and found her dabbing her eyes. Her blond hair, he noticed, had turned a yellowish gray, but the fuzz on her upper lip was heavier, darker, and plainly suggested a mustache. She had donned a balloony silk dress, and as she turned, squeezing the tears from her eyes, she put both arms about him and kissed him.

"You loved him, didn't you?"

Bart nodded and patted her awkwardly. After a little, she wiped her eyes again, told him to take off his overcoat, and sit down. When he had complied, and had perched himself on the edge of the plush davenport, she seated herself directly opposite him, carefully spreading out the folds of her dress.

"Now, you must tell me all about everything," she invited.

Bart blundered through a lame recital, while Gertrude listened, compressing her pale lips now and then, encouraging him with brief nods of her head.

"And how's my brother?"

The boy hesitated to speak about Stephen's quarrel with Philo. So he replied he thought his uncle was getting on all right, and his family, too.

"I heard Lizzie lost her baby; is that so?"

Bart had not heard of that; had not even known Lizzie had been expecting a baby.

"How long you going to be up?"

"Oh, just for to-day, and maybe to-night, if Josh can bunk me."

"He'll be glad to, I'm sure; he has a large double bed, and you'll be quite comfortable. I wish you could stay longer. Felix will want to see you. He's a senior in the Lowell High School, now; Ada's at the Girls; she'll be a medalist, you know; they're both doing splendidly. Have you had your lunch?"

The question was put so abruptly that Bart, taken unawares, replied in the affirmative.

"Well, that's good; we've had ours quite some time ago. We lunch early. Now, I hope you'll make yourself comfortable. You can put your things in Joshua's room—you'll find it at the end of the hall up the stairs, and there's some books over there under the table, if you care to read. We have supper at six; your uncle will be busy below until then, but we have to eat promptly on account of your brother. You'll excuse me, I know; I've a sick child on my hands; Dora's got an earache, nothing serious—just a slight infection. She needs hot poultices every hour. . . . . I think I hear her calling, now."

§ 4

Bart spent the afternoon wandering up and down Divisadero Street, looking into shop windows. He bought himself a sandwich, a cup of coffee, and returned to the Farnsworth house at four. The books his aunt had indicated proved to be a collection of nothingness, but he dipped into the pages of *Won by Waiting,* until the clumsy thump of feet on the stairs and in the hall brought Felix into the room, a tall, rangy, blond boy of eighteen with a pasty, pimply face. Their halting conversation received no help from his sister when, some minutes later, Ada appeared. Bart found her a quiet, expressionless girl of fifteen, who had blond hair and blond eyelashes like her mother's, and lowered these in confusion whenever he looked at her. Noise and healthy vitality entered with the arrival of Josh, about twenty-four years old, who was stocky, well built, forceful, alert, likable, with observing eyes under well defined black brows, and a square jaw turned blue by his closely shaven beard. Bart warmed to him at once. He promptly rescued Bart from the inanity of his cousins by a brisk, "Come along while I scrub up," and carried him to his attic room above. While at the washbasin, he listened to a report of the family.

"I've so darned little time to myself these days," Josh complained. "To get to school by seven every evening, I have to leave here at six-twenty-five sharp."

"How do you like teaching, Josh?" Bart asked.

"Well enough. They're mostly young shavers in the neighborhood. They like to raise Cain, and sometimes I have to give an older boy a good hiding."

"You *do!*" Bart was amused.

"Oh, once in a while; but the majority of them really want to learn. . . . . Come on, there's the bell. I'll be back to-night about ten-thirty, and we can talk then—although I've some boning to do," he added, knitting his thick brows.

Supper was quickly over. Josh bolted his pie, swallowed his milk, and hurriedly took his departure.

Felix and Ada unceremoniously disappeared. Their mother, explaining they had gone to study, followed their example with a word about earachy Dora. Uncle Porter must work at accounts, and took himself off to regions below. The home offering no diversions, Bart had recourse to the streets once more, and wandered as far as Fillmore, where he paid his way into a nickelodeon and watched his first motion picture.

Josh found him in his room waiting, when he came in shortly before eleven o'clock. The young medical student was less hurried than he had been at supper time. Flinging off his coat and removing his shoes, he settled himself into a Morris chair, propped his feet against the bed, lit a cigarette, and gave Bart his attention.

"Well, how about it, now?" he began; "let's have the news over again. Ma's not well, you say. What's the matter with her?"

Bart explained the reason of his trip to San Francisco. His mother had become increasingly worried over varicose veins in her legs; the Guadalupe doctor urged an operation, but she hated the thought of one; she wanted Josh's advice.

"If they're bad enough, she ought to do something about 'em," the older boy said; "they're dangerous; if one of 'em should break, she might bleed to death. Medcraft knows his business; if he thinks an operation's necessary, she should go through with it."

"You know Ma; I guess she hoped you'd urge her against it."

"How the deuce can I? I couldn't hazard an opinion without seeing 'em . . . ."

The young man frowned and ran a hand across his forehead.

"I'll write Medcraft, and I'll write her," he decided, pulling at his under lip; "she oughtn't to wait if he thinks they're bad. Well, how's Philo getting on with the ranch? Is he making money?"

Bart recited the dismal tale of the anthrax, and of late spring frosts the previous year. The brothers fell to discussing the family.

"And Jack likes it?"

"He seems to, but I don't see how he can stand that old—old sourball."

"Philo *is* a good deal of a grouch," Josh conceded; "I shouldn't care to work for him. . . . . And you? What are you going to do with yourself?"

Bart grimaced, shrugging his shoulders.

"I don't know," he said; "Uncle Philo rides me all the time, and Ma stands for it. Cam's the only one who sees how mean he is. Gosh, I'd like to break away . . . ."

"Why don't you?"

"Ah, gee, why don't I?" Bart repeated with impatience. "How *can* I? I couldn't get to college, like Gill; I never finished grammar school, and Philo'd never let me go; says I'm needed round the ranch. Wants me to work, and jumps on me for everything I do. If I cut away, where could I find a job? Doing what, I'd like to know?"

"Come on up here and try your luck."

"That's easy to say, but Uncle Philo and Ma never'd let me."

His brother studied him.

"You'll have to grow some for a while," he observed; "you're young yet. I'd advise you to stick it out down there for a couple of years—say, until you're twenty-one—and then I'll look round and see if I can't find something for you."

He picked up the heavy volume of *Gray's Anatomy*.

"I have to do some studying, now," he said, opening the book. "You get to bed, and I'll put out the center light. I'll be reading for a couple of hours and may be gone in the morning before you wake. Clinic at seven. Wish you'd stay up for a couple of days; no trouble having you."

"Naw, I must go back to-morrow night. I've arranged to take the express, and Jane's driving over to meet me in Guadalupe."

He began slowly to undress.

Fitting the loops of his spectacles behind his ears, Josh arranged the gas droplight by a long tube to the center fixture, crossed his shoeless feet upon another chair, and settled himself to his work. Bart, finally out of his clothes, turned out the remaining jet, crawled to the further side of the bed, and lay there for some time, a hard forearm tucked beneath his head.

"Say, Josh," he spoke out suddenly; "sorry to interrupt. You haven't said a word about Gill! I promised Ma I'd go over to see him. How do I find him?"

His brother raised spectacled eyes to stare at his questioner for a moment over their rims.

"Darned if I know. I haven't seen nor heard of him since Christmas. . . . . D'you know how to get over to Berkeley?"

"Yeh, I guess so. I'll find my way all right."

"He works in the Coöp; that's all I know. You'll find him there, or if not, they can tell you where he lives."

"What's the Coöp?"

"The Students' Coöperative Association, I believe it is, a store where the undergraduates buy their books and things. It's located in one of the buildings—North Hall. When you get over there you just ask for the Coöp; anybody'll direct you. And if you see Gill, tell him, for criminy sakes, to look me up. He's got a damn sight more leisure than I have."

§ 5

As Bart made his way next morning across the bridge and under the oaks which led to the campus of the university, he experienced a complexity of tumultuous emotions.

On the further side of wild grass fields stretching before him, he made out two spacious brick buildings flanking a smaller one, which stood back somewhat from the large edifices, a tall flagpole before it. Students with textbooks and note-books beneath their arms were either hurrying toward or leisurely sauntering away from the entrances. Boys and girls, approximately Bart's own age! He noted the battered silk plug hats some of the men wore, while others sported equally maltreated gray ones, gayly painted and incongruously lettered. At every glance in his direction, the color rose in Bart's face, conscious as he was of his countryfied clothes and rustic appearance.

But his heart beat high, none the less. This was Berkeley, the site of the big State University, and he was thrilled to think he was actually treading the classic campus and staring up at its great buildings! . . . . Ah, to be allowed to enter here, to be one of these sauntering, careless-mannered boys, to belong rightfully in their midst! . . . .

Mustering courage, he dared to ask directions of a bespectacled youth, who squinted at him, measured him in a swift glance, and jerked his thumb toward the structure directly before them. In and about this building, as Bart approached, seethed a mob of students, and on its far side he came upon a wide staircase filled with an almost solid phalanx of idling, smoking, jesting undergraduates. Terror suddenly possessed him; he was about to beat a hasty retreat when immediately in front of him, over a basement entrance, his eyes encountered "Students' Coöperative Society." Gratefully he darted within its doors.

But in none of the four or five young student clerks behind the counters did he recognize his brother. As he stared about in bewilderment, one spoke to him.

"Anything you want?"

"I was looking for—for a friend of mine," Bart stammered; "Mr. Carter."

"Which Mr. Carter?"

Bart had to think. Nobody here would know his brother as "Gill." Captain Dan had nicknamed the twins "Jack and Jill" at their birth, and "Jill" had been corrupted to "Gill," with a hard-sounding "G," when the latter had grown to boy-size. All through his schooldays and his teens, "Gill," had stuck to him, but now he was twenty-three and in college. Bart had to recall to mind his rightful name was Henry Aloysius, before asking for him.

"Hey, Hank!" the clerk called over his shoulder, and in a moment, from an inner office, a green celluloid shade over his eyes, Gill appeared and with a surprised grin came forward. "For God' sakes, Mr. Man," he cried, wringing Bart's hand; "what brings you to these halls of erudition?"

"Came up to see Josh; Ma wanted me to ask him about something, and she told me to come over and find out how you were getting along. I have to go right back this afternoon," Bart added hurriedly, fearing Gill might think he intended to stay.

"Well, say," his brother suggested, glancing at the clock over the door, "drill period's in a few minutes, but I'll cut. We'll walk down to Berkeley and have some chow. Wait round here for me, will you? I can't leave before eleven."

Just as the cadet bugles were blowing "Assembly" and crowds of boys in blue uniforms and Civil War caps were emerging from the octagon-shaped gymnasium, belted, bayoneted, and bearing rifles, Bart and Gill left the student store and headed for the town.

Fifteen minutes later they were astride stools in a lunch wagon, and Gill was saying expansively:

"I don't want any agriculture in my life. There's not enough money in it. I don't savvy all these chaps up here going to Cow College. I'm going to look after Number One, you bet, and I'm going to get somewhere in this world before I'm done with it. . . . . College is a great place, Mr. Man; you ought to make a try for it; teaches you a devil of a lot. . . . . Have a great proposition lined up when I'm through here. A Senior, friend of mine, has a rich dad back in New York, and he's promised me a job there, if I can work my way East, and you can bet I'm going to . . . ."

He rambled on, enlarging upon his schemes for the future.

It was a year and more since Bart had seen him, for Gill had worked in a lumber camp the previous summer and had not come home. Bart watched his beetling eyebrows as they wiggled up and down while he talked, watched his lean, hollow-cheeked face, his keen, roving eyes, his wide expansive mouth with its square white teeth. There was something dynamic about Gill; he was full of enthusiasm, bubbling with ideas.

"How's my twin?" he demanded with abruptness.

"Jack? . . . . Oh, Jack's all right. He seems to get along fine with Uncle Philo——"

"That old bastard!"

"I don't like him any better 'an you do."

"Why Ma puts up with him, beats me. Jack c'n run the ranch all right. I suppose Uncle Philo has an interest in the place now, and it'll take Almighty God to get rid of him."

"Josh asked me to tell you to look him up next time you're in the city; says you've got lots more time than he has——"

"The hell I have—putting in three mornings and two afternoons a week at the Coöp!"

"What do they pay you, Gill?"

"Forty, but I make as much more soliciting ads for the college papers; get a ten per cent. commission, and I've most of the merchants in Oakland and Berkeley hooked up. . . . . I'm saving money!"

"Is that right? Gee, I'd like to be doing that!"

"I pulled myself out of Carterville by my boot straps, and I'm going to keep on pulling myself up by 'em till I get somewhere. Pass the mustard, Mr. Man; I'm going to kill another one of these Hamburgers . . . . ."

They parted an hour later at the station, Gill to hasten back to a "one o'clock," his brother to catch a train for the city in time for the express to Gilroy.

On the ferry crossing the Bay, Bart hung over the gunwale of the boat, his hand clasping his head to keep the stiff wind from making off with his hat. He watched a flock of screaming gulls fighting over the refuse of some ship's galley.

It represented a good picture of life, he thought gloomily—men and women scrambling and battling among themselves over a mess of garbage; some got the big pieces, some got nothing; some were lucky, some weren't. That was all there was to existence!

He went inside, found an obscure corner in the rear of the boat, and began to write a poem about the analogy.

CHAPTER II

§ 1

When the stage set him down at Guadalupe, he saw with a little sinking of the heart that it was Peggy who had come to meet him. But he hid his disappointment, flung his straw valise into the surrey's seat, and climbed in beside her with a cheerful:

"'Lo, Peg. Thanks a lot. What's the matter with——" He was going to say "Jane," but amended it to "the other girls?" Peggy edged into the seat next the driver's and handed him the reins.

"Oh, I guess they were all busy and had something to do, because Trude, I know, wanted to go to Vespers, and Janey, who said she was coming after you, decided to ride somewheres with Jack, because I saw them bringing 'Rags' round to the house, and then Jo was drying her hair, and Tilly and Cam were fussing in the kitchen over something, you know the way they do."

Peg had a funny habit of rushing her words together in a breathlessly eager way.

"I was awfully glad to be allowed to come," she went on; "I love to drive."

"Ma say anything?"

"How you mean?"

"About your coming alone."

"I drove over this afternoon because I wanted to see Pudgie Cook. Her father was killed day before yesterday."

"Who? The sheriff?"

"Un-hun, he was just riding along, Pudgie says, and his horse must have stepped in a gopher hole, because they found him lying where he'd fallen with his neck broke, and the horse came back alone, and there doesn't seem to be any violence or anything. Poor Mrs. Cook has just been crying her eyes out, and the girls feel something dreadful because there isn't any money and they've all got to go to work."

Bart frowned over the tragedy, but was diverted by Peggy's questions about his trip. He liked this young cousin of his though she was not so pretty as either Jane or Josephine. Both sisters were beauties, but Peg had a girlishness he always had found agreeable. She admired him, he knew, and he could allow himself a certain amount of expansiveness when talking with her. Now, half consciously, he touched up his adventures of the past three days for her benefit.

"I told Eva Ann she was a fool not to make Tony help her more round the house. . . . . Josh promised to get me a job in the city . . . . but maybe I'll go to U. C. next year. . . . . That bum, Felix Farnsworth, is a sickly guy; he gives me a pain . . . ."

The horses jogged docilely onward, the old surrey creaking in their wake. An early moon had risen, and the empty fields were shimmering with unearthly light; now and then a towering group of eucalyptus trees threw inky blots across the white road, and ghostly mists rose from the hollows to hang suspended in long trailing scarves above the meadows. Warm pin pricks of light marked the windows of distant ranch homes, and overhead, the heavens glittered with a million stars. The night air was sharp; the girl shivered and drew her cloak about her.

"Cold, Peggy?"

"Yes, a little."

Transferring the reins to his right hand, Bart slipped his left arm about the girl and drew her to him. She snuggled close, resting against him, and thus they drove on, while the boy's thoughts went back to his poem about the gulls, and he tried to think of a rhyme for "pelf."

Water trickled musically into a tank beside the road; a windmill, on top an iron frame, twisted and groaned, while the faint stirring of night air brought the fragrance of almond blossoms.

". . . . delf . . . . elf . . . . shelf . . . . *whelf*. There's no such word as 'whelf'!"

"Bart, are you talking to yourself?"

He laughed in quick embarrassment.

"Guess I was thinking about you; you're a kind of an 'elf', you know."

"You're silly!"

"Well, perhaps," he conceded.

They talked, fell silent, talked again, as the moon rose, bathing the valley in soft, silvery splendor. After a long hour, a twinkling of lights announced Carterville, and noisily the vehicle rattled through the sleeping town.

At one side of the brief main street, red lanterns and a pile of lumber made Bart pull the team sharply to the left.

"What's all that?" he demanded.

"A bank, I think Papa said it was; the Guadalupe National's going to open a branch here. They broke ground and started excavating the day you left."

"Well, say, we're coming on! We'll have a regular town here before we know it. That's three new buildings this year."

A few minutes later, he guided the horses between the pillars that flanked the entrance of Los Robles. The old white gate on which he used to swing as a boy, had long ago been replaced by an iron pair that hung now from brick posts, and usually stood open. The horses, stable and fodder near, briskly circled the lawn; Bart brought them to a standstill before the house, where Peggy descended, and he then drove them to the barn.

The house seemed deserted when he entered it. The gas jet in the glass globe on the newel post was lit, casting its red and blue blots on walls and ceiling of the hall; the parlor and dining rooms were dark. Upstairs he found his mother in bed with Camilla and Josephine at their sewing beside her. Peggy had joined them and was telling about her visit to Pudgie Cook.

"Not sick, Ma, are you?" Bart asked, noting she was in bed and stooping to kiss her.

No, there was nothing the matter; she had just felt a little tired. She was eager for news. What about the children?

During his account of his visit to Eva Ann, Josephine sniffed impatiently, and at his description of the Farnsworth household, Cam shook her head. When he paused, both girls spoke up, Josephine sharply critical, Camilla gravely dubious. Tilly came in, giggling at sight of her brother, and most of his story had to be repeated. Next, Trudie appeared, and a third time he had to go over it. But there was no sign of Jane, and Bart had presently to ask for her.

"She went riding with Jack this afternoon; they went 'way over to San Geronimo. She was tired, and turned in directly after supper."

"And Gill? Tell us more about Gill, how's he managing?" his mother wanted to know.

"All right, I guess; works in the Students' Coöperative Store. Makes lots of money; says he's going to New York when he graduates."

"New York! Just fancy! What ideas these young people get now'days!"

The women talked on. Peggy was the first to go, then Trudie and Tilly, and shortly after, Josephine folded up her embroidery, put spools and materials carefully away in her sewing box, tapped Bart lightly on his head with a finger tip, and said good-night. He was free at last to discuss with his mother and oldest sister Josh's opinion regarding the varicose veins. It was after ten before he rose, kissed both good-night, and left them arguing the advisability of an operation. Wearily he climbed the stairs to his room, conscious of being very tired.

But before he might fling himself gratefully into bed he had a duty to perform. Unpacking his straw valise, he put away its contents, wound the alarm clock, gave his small quarters a brief inspection, then, from beneath the newspaper lining of a bureau drawer, he extracted a key, opened a locked tin box which he brought down from the closet shelf, and took out a thick book bulging with closely written pages.

His eye ran hastily over the last entry; then he spread it open on the table, picked up his pen and began:

"I have so much to write about, and I'm so sleepy . . . ."

§ 2

Yawning, hardly more than half awake, Bart came down to breakfast the following morning a little after six. He found Jack at the table, stuffing into his mouth the last of the hot-cakes the Chinese boy had brought him.

"Hello, kid; good trip? How's the rah-rah boy? Didjeseehim?"

Bart was not in a communicative mood, but as he answered Jack, he could not but compare him with his twin, Gill, clean-jawed, close-cropped of head, easy, confident in manner, definite, assertive; Jack was long-haired, unshaven, a bit uncouth, countryfied, wearing a gingham jumper over his white shirt, his blue, well worn overalls turned up at the ankles, revealing high-heeled cowboy boots with jingling spurs. So different the two were, despite their similarity!

"Unc' wants you to see Fong and get from him a list of staples in bulk and in case goods lots," Jack told him; "wants you to find out what wholesale prices are in Guadalupe; maybe cheaper getting 'em there than having 'em shipped straight to us by freight from the city. You can telephone, I guess. Then you're to take Dolly and Daisy over to Buck Cheney's and have 'em shod, and when you're back, go to whitewashing the 'cot trees across the crick. You'll have to ride one of the mares into town; we're hitching Clown with Spigot to the surrey; Ma, Tilly, and the girls are drivin' in to the Cook funeral."

Bart nodded unsmilingly and bent over his dish of oatmeal. He disliked having his pinto driven; it wasn't good for any horse. That was some of his uncle's doing; Philo always ridiculed his riding.

Jack clumped out of the room, spurs clinking, while Bart gloomily finished his breakfast and went to interview Fong.

The day was gray and wet with fog; the eucalyptus trees, long spirals of torn red bark, tattered green and yellow leaves about their feet, dripped heavily upon the roofs of the ranchmen's cottages. In the cook-house, the fat old Chinaman was beating a rhythmical tattoo with a hand chopper in a wooden bowl. Ignoring Bart, and with a beady eye occasionally turned heavenward, he interrupted his drumming now and then to apostrophize the void regarding his wants.

"I tink 'em six piecie bacon . . . . ah, fitty poun' coffee . . . . ah, sac' shugar . . . . ah, sac' flour . . . . ah, ten gallon molassey . . . . ah, ten piecie codfish . . . ."

Bart scribbled down the list, drawing faces of ugly men and pretty girls on the margin and corners of the paper while the Chinaman paused to remember his requirements. Through the window he watched the absurd antics of a squirrel squatting on his hind legs, rolling an acorn around and around between his paws, smelling it with his whiskered nose.

"'A squirrel poised upon a limb
Is one of Nature's cherubim,'"

sang his unconscious mind.

The office of the ranch was situated in a square box-like building directly beneath the water tank and bounded at its corners by the iron uprights supporting the reservoir. Armed with his list, Bart was about to enter it to do his telephoning, when at the doorway he came face to face with Philo.

The man stopped short to survey him, his black brows knitting.

"Got back, did you? . . . . How'd you find everybody?"

"All right."

"How're the boys?"

"Fine."

"An' your sister?"

"She's well."

"Tony making any money?"

"Guess so."

"Un-hun . . . ." There was a pause; then:

"Got Fong's list? Let's see what he wants."

He took Bart's scribbled paper, smudged and decorated with his crude caricatures and simpering profiles; the boy felt the man's displeasure.

"Find out 'bout brown sugar," Philo said, rehanding him the slip; "it's good enough for the men." He was about to go, but checked himself.

"Y'know 'bout your horse? I had to use him."

Bart inclined his head.

"When you get done whitewashing, I want you to start with the weed-cutter over in the prune orchard."

The boy looked up with a quick frown.

"The whitewashing will take me three days!" His tone was sharp and aggrieved.

"I know it, son," Philo said evenly; "I said when you'd *finished* whitewashing, not when you were half or a quarter done with it."

Bart's teeth clicked; he jerked his head, strode into the office, closing the door behind him with a smart clap.

"Hang him—*hang* him!" he said angrily.

While he waited for the Guadalupe operator to complete his calls, he drew more of his hideous faces and long-lashed, full-lipped profiles on the blotter, papers, and correspondence on his uncle's desk. He knew it would annoy Philo when he found them there.

§ 3

An hour later, he was sitting on the ground, smoking a cigarette, his back against the sliding door of the blacksmith shop, waiting for Buck Cheney to finish shoeing the mares; as he idled, the surrey drove by with his mother and the girls on their way into Guadalupe. Jane held the reins, her strong, gloved hands gripping the leathers, the whip flourishing. Bart could see the pinto was troublesome; Clown did not like the indignity of traces any more than did his master.

Tilly waved a black glove at Bart, and Jane, leaning from the vehicle, pointing to his pony with her whip, called:

"He's a funny-colored horse to be driving to a funeral!"

Bart caught a glimpse of her white teeth and thought he saw the blue in her eyes. He laughed at her sally and made a pantomime of applauding with his palms. The rattling wagon disappeared down the street, leaving a billowing cloud of dust.

Bareback and astride the roan mare, Dolly's halter in his left hand, he started back with the horses to Los Robles. As he approached the entrance, it occurred to him that it would be shorter to bring his lumbering charges to the barn by way of the curved driveway than to use the gate a hundred yards or so up the road generally taken by the ranch wagons and cattle. He succeeded in turning Daisy's head toward the brick pillars, but Dolly, accustomed to the further entrance, pulled back. Bart clung to her halter, urging her on, but the horse jerked her head at the strain of the rope, and dragged the precariously seated young man from his perch, sending him toppling to the ground. Alarmed by his tumble, both horses bolted, briskly trotting away. Bart watched them turn in at the upper gate and, with halters trailing, make for the barn.

"You darn fool, why did you try to lead 'em in the wrong way, and then why didn't you give Dolly her head? She just wanted to go home the way she's used to," a voice cried, and Bart looked up from his humiliating position to see Jack, astride his own hairy mustang, grinning at him from the other side of the fence.

"Damn!" Bart exclaimed disgustedly, scrambling to his feet.

"Cheer up, kid; no harm done; they went straight home. You certainly looked funny, though, when they trotted off and left you sitting on your behind." Jack laughed again, waved his hand, and loped away through the orchard, bending far over his horse's neck to avoid an occasional low-hanging branch.

Bart had hardly more than completed the mixing of the whitewash when the ranch bell clapped its tongue, announcing noon. Uncle Philo, Camilla, Jack, Trudie, and himself were the only members of the family at the dinner table, and he had to listen, as he knew he must, and for some time to come, to his brother's account of his fall and discomfiture. He did not mind Jack's telling the tale—he realized he was no hand with horses—but his jaw shut as he noted the lift of his uncle's lip and the twitch of his eyebrow. Trudie asked:

"You didn't hurt yourself, did you, Bart?" and he felt Camilla's solicitous eye upon him as he shook his head.

Shortly after one, he was busy slopping the base of each apricot tree with a dripping foot-wide whitewash brush. The fog had rolled away and lay in gray banks against the crest of La Canada hills; a wan sun was shining, and the landscape was filled with pale, winterish light. Jays looped the budding branches and screamed angrily to one another. In the creek, Bart could hear the fresh gurgle of water, and above it the chug and hiccoughy cough of the gas engine, while from the Chinese camp there came the greasy smell of boiling lard and the acrid odor of stale ashes. His stooped position made his back ache, the whitewash burned his hands and dried in stinging patches on his forearm and in spatters on his face and neck. He thought resentfully of his uncle; one of the

Chinks could have done this work just as well, even better than himself. Philo always delegated the dirtiest jobs to him. Riding the weed-cutter was not going to be so bad, but he foresaw he was likely to uproot a sapling or bark one of the trees, and that was certain to delight Philo, as it would give him a fine excuse for a big calling down. . . . . Josh and Gill were the wise birds; they had cleared out before it was too late. If he could only live as they did, responsible to no one! . . . . This rotten work . . . .

He dropped the brush in the bucket, wiped his hands on his splashed overalls, seated himself against a tree, rolled a cigarette, and looked out over the gentle curve of land which sloped down to the highway and to his uncle Stephen's domain beyond. He could see the cluster of trees surrounding the house, a corner of its gabled roof, and a thin spiral of smoke that rose in the almost motionless air, to form a question mark, disintegrating gradually as it drifted slowly toward the foothills.

"God asked a question in the smoke
That moved across the homestead hill,
And something in a boy awoke,
Awoke and answered and was still."

He half spoke the words aloud, when the rapid impact of loping hooves, and a bass "Well, I'll be damned!" brought him hurriedly to his knees. From the towering height of his horse's back, Philo Carter looked down upon him. White-faced, his heart leaping to a quick beat, Bart stared up at him.

"Some folks round here ain't worth their salt," the man began. Bart hurriedly reached for the brush handle and slopped viciously at the nearest unpainted trunk, but his uncle was not done with him. Long after he had wrenched his animal's head about and galloped away, the stinging words of abuse lingered in the air, bludgeoning the boy's ears.

§ 4

"Janey, I got a lot to tell you; can't you walk down the road a bit after you're finished?" Bart's cousin was learning a new knitting stitch from Tilly, and the heads of both young women were bent close to the lamp in the middle of the dining table which, but a moment before, they had cleared of the supper dishes.

"All right, Bart; half a jiffy."

In the kitchen, Peggy and Trudie were busy washing up; Camilla was there too, putting what was left of the evening's meal into the ice box, thinking out the morrow's menus. From the porch drifted an altercation of voices. Bart's mother, in her placid, flat tones of finality, was attempting to dismiss Josephine's high-pitched arguments in favor of woman suffrage, while, from the steps near them, Jack was endeavoring to persuade his uncle to plant another forty acres to prunes or 'cots.

"You see, you drop two and pick up one . . . ."

"But why should I vote when there's your father and Jack? I'd vote the way they'd tell me to, and so would you."

"I tell you, Unc', there isn't the money there used to be in beef. All this land round here's going to be planted to fruit some day."

Bart slumped in an armchair in the dining room, his hands deep in his trousers pockets, whistled an inaudible tune, watching Jane. She was lovely, he thought; the lamp directly behind her head defined her profile with an aura of yellow light, and turned her tangle of fair curls to a shining golden crown. A yearning for her, her friendship, her championship, her sympathy, rose within him. The whole of the past week, particularly the days of his absence, she had been almost constantly in his mind. Of them all, he said to himself, she was the only one for whom he "gave a hang." Friendly, generous, likeable Jane! Since schooldays she had been his favorite. He had been the first to appreciate her; now, the rest of the family had discovered her. It was "Jane here," "Jane there"; everybody sought her, solicited her opinion, her society. He speculated on what a row there'd be if he and she, following Tony's and Eva Ann's example, should run away and get married! What an uproar! And what a wholesome jolt for that surly old curmudgeon, his uncle! . . . . Bart Carter and his daughter! *Ha!*

The scowl on his face faded into a slow smile.

"Come on, Jane, if you're coming."

"Half a jiffy, Bart."

A summons for Tilly from the kitchen ended the knitting lesson. Jane gathered up her needles and wool, put them away in the sideboard drawer, and turned to Bart.

"All right; where do you want to go?"

He led her out through the back entrance, thankful no one in the kitchen detained her. It was a fresh spring evening with threatening fog coming down from the hills; in the west, a pink flush was rapidly dying, giving place to an opalescent blue, fast crowded by the dark curtain of night. Frogs were chorusing in sharp staccato, and from over by the cowboys' cottages, rose the lugubrious wail of an accordion, a cracked voice, and the subdued murmur of men talking.

The young people crossed the graveled yard behind the house, their feet crunching in the fine screenings, and headed for the highway. When they came to the fence, Bart helped the girl over it, and they scrambled through the long grass, climbing the bank to the road.

"Tell me about Eva Ann. How's she getting along with Tony?"

Bart was weary of talking about his Northern visit. He wanted to speak about other things.

"Aw—gee—let's forget about them——

"Oh, they're getting along all right," he hurried to add, fearing he seemed rude. "Eva Ann is going—" he hesitated, then boldly proceeded—"to have another baby." He felt himself a man of the world, imparting this information, but Jane took him up at once:

"My goodness," she said, "not another? Why, that's three of them, isn't it? They must be crazy."

Not knowing just how to proceed along this line, Bart changed the subject.

"Josh and Gill, they're the boys! They're the fellows that know what they're about! Both of 'em have pulled themselves up by their boot straps, and they're going to keep on pulling 'emselves up till they get some place. . . . . Gee, I wish I was like them!"

His words ended dismally. There was a pause before Jane spoke.

"I know; it *does* seem kind of hard on you down here. There's nothing to interest you. But things are going to be better. There'll be some money soon to send you away. Jack says we ought to have a banner fruit crop this season. The prunes and 'cots are loaded with blossoms——"

"They're always saying that!" Bart interrupted. "Year after year, it's the same old story. Your father hasn't any use for me; he's always rubbing it in."

"Oh, no, Bart——"

"It's true; he just *hates* me."

"That's perfect foolishness, Bart, and you know it. He's doing the best he can for all of us. Sometimes he gets a little cross, but he works awfully hard. Imagine his responsibilities."

The boy did not reply. He strolled beside her, his fingers hooked in his hip pockets, kicking the hard ground with the toes of his rough shoes. Sadness weighed him down. A longing to unburden himself came overpoweringly upon him; he wanted to pour out his heart, to vent all the repressed emotions within him, to lay bare his soul. How express it? Where find the right phrase, the first word?

The tinge of pink on the western horizon had vanished now; the opalescence had changed to turquoise blue, and over the rim of hills up toward La Canada Pass, a shimmering halo of light indicated where the moon would presently rise.

Jane, hugging her elbows, voiced her sister's complaint of the night before.

"It's cold," she said, and shivered. But Bart could not put his arm about her and draw her to him as he had done with Peggy.

"Well, let's turn back."

How it would shock them, bring them all to a realization of their cruel injustice if he should "swipe" Jack's gun and shoot himself!

"Jane!" he burst out and his voice broke.

"You mustn't feel so discontented, Bart; things are bound to be better before long. Good times are coming. Wait a couple of years; you aren't very old yet."

His lips were sealed; the struggle went on boiling inside. The girl continued her easy reassuring phrases, and presently he had himself in hand again.

"Do you remember the hayloft in your barn," he said, "and how we used to scramble up there as kids, and I used to tell you long, fantastic stories?"

"Oh, do I? Why, I find myself thinking about them any number of times! They were wonderful stories, too."

"Some of them I lifted out of the Third Reader."

"Yes, I know. But I liked the way you told them. You always made yourself the hero."

He gave an embarrassed ejaculation. "Kid stuff," he said, with a frown.

"Well, it made them seem very real to me. I loved them. I remember every one of my favorites."

He said nothing. He was thinking of the sound of the rain on the barn roof. . . . . Why was it he could talk to her so freely then, but now was so loutishly inarticulate?

They had reached the brick pillars of the ranch's gateway and begun a slow circuit of the oval grass plot. The lawn was full of weeds now, the trees were overgrown, and the beds where once Matty had loved to see her roses blooming, were bare and soil-caked, an occasional weather-beaten garden stick marking the spot of a dead bush. Sometimes Fong, or Sam, the kitchen boy, mowed the grass, and left a sprinkler slowly to revolve, sending a languid trickle from its waving arms. Beneath the thick foliage of the evergreens, it was dark and smelled of mold; the ground was still moist from winter rains.

"Do you like me, Jane?" Bart could not see her face, but he found her hand in the shadow.

"Why, you know I do." The fingers squeezed his own.

He swallowed a lump in his throat.

"I think about you a lot."

"Do you? Nice things, I hope."

"Oh, you don't know . . . . you don't know . . . . I . . . . you . . . ." He stopped, his inarticulateness an agony.

"I'm sorry you're so unhappy. Several times, of late, I've noticed your face. You look quite woebegone."

"I don't belong here. I hate this place. I want to get away."

"Then why don't you go? Your brothers ought to find you some kind of a position in 'Frisco."

"Your father wouldn't let me; Ma wouldn't, either. And besides, I don't want to go without . . . . without . . . ."

"Without what? I don't understand."

"Oh, yes, you do. You know what I mean."

"'Fraid I don't, Bart; tell me."

He struggled desperately.

"You," he exploded.

"Me!" There was surprise in her voice, and then silence.

"I want you to go away with me, Jane, go away with me like Eva Ann and Tony Rodoni, the way my father and mother did . . . ."

"You mean *marry?*" The girl's tone rang with frank astonishment

Bart halted, burying his face in his hands, tightly compressing his lips to keep back the burst of sound that pressed against them. Then suddenly restraint was gone.

"Yes, yes, marry me, or wait for me, Jane, until I can come home and take you away. I . . . . I . . . . oh, well, you know! . . . . you're the only person I care about in this world. You're everything to me. You're the sun and the moon . . . . you're my eyes and my fingers and my ears and my nose . . . . you're life to me. I want you. I can't live without you. You're the girl of my heart, the girl of my dreams . . . ."

His words carried him away; his emotion devastated him; he was surprised at his own violence. Now and then, through his wild outpouring of words, he could hear Jane's mounting remonstrance:

"Please, please, *please,* Bart . . . ."

He was spent, and leaned against a tree trunk, his hands once more covering his face. Jane stood close beside him, and for a time there was only the sound of his wet intake of breath and his deep heaving.

"Bart," she began gently but firmly, "you must forget about all this; you must put me forever out of your mind. I'm very fond of you; we've always been the best of friends, and always will. But you mustn't care for me like that, Bart; it isn't right; it's sin. You and I are cousins, Bart, and even if I returned your affection, there could be no thought of union between us. We are blood relations. Your mother and my father would never permit it; the Church would never sanction it; marriage between cousins is forbidden——"

He made one more outburst.

"But *second* cousins, Jane! Your father and mine were only first. It isn't the same; there wouldn't be any harm . . . ."

His voice died upon the protest, as Jane commenced once more to speak. She talked on, now and then laying a kind hand upon his arm, repeating her arguments, her iterations of affection, her sympathy. He did not hear her. He was thinking of himself, pitying himself, dramatizing the tragedy of his position, admiring himself a little too, for the depth of feeling he had shown.

The chill of the night air parted them. Bart felt the girl shivering beside him. Huskily he urged her to go, but to her last urgent pleading that he would try to put her out of his mind and forget his unholy infatuation, he would give her no assurance. Abruptly he left her, striding down amid the dark shadows of the driveway to the road, setting his face away from the village.

The moon was now fully up, and soft patches of drifting fog were scudding before its face. He walked on and on, the flat reaches of grazing land stretching away from him on either side, barren of object and life. The night was deserted; the world empty to him save for his own solitary figure.

He paused at length, wearily leaned his elbows upon the fence beside the road, and for a long time stared across the barren flats that rolled gently away toward an undistinguishable horizon. Once more the wave of self-pity mastered him; his heart contracted fiercely with his longing and his love.

"Oh, Jane—Jane," he murmured. Tears brimmed from his eyes and wet his cheeks.

He enjoyed his desolation and his grief.

CHAPTER III

§ I

It was June, and an unusual wave of early summer heat was urging the maturing fruit to hurried ripeness. A big crop was in sight. Among the peaches, the "Hale's Earlies" and the "Alexanders" were already showing color. Philo Carter had a prejudice against the Japanese and refused to employ them. Of late they had been invading the district around Guadalupe in increasing numbers, and by an arrangement with the owners of a share-and-share-alike-in-the-profits plan were operating many of the largest as well as smaller orchards in the lower Santa Clara Valley. Several of the growers agreed with Philo about the Japanese. As the interlopers acquired control of more and more ranches, they became an important factor in the industry, forcing out other labor, particularly the Chinese. Chinamen were no longer to be had. Pickers of any nationality were scarce, and on many ranches fruit ripened on the trees faster than it could be gathered.

At one end of the cutting shed, separated from the cutting room by a partition, Bart was nailing fruit boxes together. The boxes came from the factory in pieces, sides, bottoms, and ends corded in bundles; a dozen or so nails knocked each into shape. He liked the work, the smell of freshly sawed lumber, liked the feel of the neat wooden pieces, the sharp rap of his hammer which drove the nails home.

Los Robles was pulsing with sound, confusion, and bustle. On the other side of the partition, twenty women and girls, seated on benches, bent over tables, slicing the ripe apricots in halves before placing them on the drying trays. Every half hour or so, a long, flat truck trundled into the area before the cutting shed, backed against its receiving door, and unloaded boxes of more apricots direct from the trees. In the packing shed, which stood across the way, another group of women were filling with green plums and peaches the boxes

Bart was making. Jack superintended the loading of one of the huge ranch drays which with its toppling, corded burden would shortly depart on its slow crawl to Guadalupe, where its cargo would be transferred to waiting refrigerated express cars. On the rise of ground directly behind the cutting shed, the entire hillside was covered with rank after rank of trays filled to their edges with the halved apricots, making a carpet of brilliant orange. The burning sun curled the fruit to hard leather disks. A couple of Chinese coolies, armed with paddles, bent over the trays, scraping free the dried apricots where they had stuck to the wood.

The taps of Bart's hammer were lost in the general bedlam of noise—the shrill talk and high laughter of women, the voices and shouts of men, the complaining creak of wheels, the thump and fall of empty boxes, the bang of wood on wood, the cries of cutters and packers for more boxes. "Box-es! . . . . Box-es!" The scene was charged with excitement. Bart sensed the significance of it all, saw in the picture before him the result of the year's arduous work, the pruning, plowing, irrigation, the fulfillment of his own and his people's hopes after the long weary twelve months of planning and labor.

A growing disturbance intruded itself upon his thoughts; the throbbing tumult about him took on a different note; a fresh element had been added. He laid down his hammer and went to the door.

It was the Hindoos. Bart recalled his uncle and Jack had been discussing their coming at supper the previous night; about twenty-five were to arrive from San Francisco, so they had said, but the straggling file of giants that came stalking up the road seemed twice that number. Pickers, Bart knew they represented; Philo had been in touch with an employment agency in the city. Somehow the fruit had to be gathered; Japanese Philo would not employ; Chinese were not to be had, and Los Robles was too far south to benefit from the school children and college students who frequently availed themselves of their vacation time to work in the orchards.

The women crowding the doorways of cutting and packing sheds, the men arrested at their various tasks, might well pause and gape at the uncouth visitors, thought Bart. Giants they were, turbaned and black whiskered, most of them with bushy side chops, each clad in a soiled, worn British uniform, bearing under an arm or on his back a bulky roll of blankets.

Jack leaped down from the doorway of the packing shed, spoke to the white man who had them in charge, and presently moved off at the head of the motley company to guide them to the spot above the old Chinese camp where some tents had been pitched for their accommodation.

"Well, for land's sakes," said a woman's voice in the crowd, "whatever might y'u call them heathern-lookin' fellers?"

"They're Hindoos, Ma, can't you see? . . . . Ain't they, Bart?"

Bart glanced in the speaker's direction and saw it was Pudgie Cook. She and her sister Ossip with their mother had come over from Guadalupe to cut 'cots; they were camping with some women friends down by the creek. Joe Cook, the late sheriff, had left his widow and daughters practically penniless; Philo, at Matty's suggestion, had been glad to offer them work in his short-handed season. The cutters were paid at the rate of ten cents a box for halving apricots, and Pudgie, who was reported by Bart's sisters to be extraordinarily quick-fingered, made as much as two dollars a day.

Bart usually felt uncomfortably self-conscious with the girls who helped with the fruit during the summer-time. They were rather a brazen lot, he considered; groups of them camped along the creek and in different shaded spots of the ranch, and there was much singing, skylarking, and shrill screaming going on in the evenings between them and the cowboys or other young male ranch employees. But with Pudgie Cook Bart had been acquainted for years; she was a friend of Trudie's, had gone to the Convent of the Sacred Heart during the half year Trudie had attended there; once, when she was a little girl of twelve or thirteen, she had spent a week-end at Los Robles as Trudie's guest. With her turned-up nose and queer, funny close-set eyes, she was not in the least attractive, he thought.

"What do they wear those turbans for?" she asked him. "I should think they'd die with 'em on in all this heat."

"Oh, they have to wear 'em; it's part of their religion," he told her. "They'd be damned, or something, if they took them off."

"And the uniforms?"

"Some time or other they all belonged to the British army, I guess. Maybe they're old soldiers; maybe they're just wearing old uniforms. I think they're Sikhs," he finished with an air.

Out of the corner of his eye, he glanced at the girl; he saw she was impressed.

"How do you suppose they'll ever get on over here? They don't know the language or anything."

Bart laughed. "How do you suppose the Japs and the Chinks get on?"

"They have friends, haven't they, who sort of help them?"

"Well, you can bet your life these Hindoos are better off here in California than back in India."

"I kind of feel sorry for them; they look so helpless."

"They'd stick a knife in you quicker than a wink."

"Do you suppose they cook funny things?"

"Yes, and eat 'em, too."

Trudie came out of the cutting shed, her hands and forearms stained with fruit juice, to stand at Pudgie's side. Bart turned back to his work with a final glance at the tail of the disappearing string of silent, stalking giants. He filled the pocket of his coarse carpenter's apron with a fresh supply of nails.

"Your brother says they have to wear those turbans . . . ."

She had a funny husky quality to her voice, Bart thought. He could not hear his sister's answer.

"Your brother says they're Sikhs and that they were once British soldiers . . . ."

Bart tapped four nails into place and sent them home with four blows. He would like to be a carpenter all his life, he decided, and have always to do with clean, shining tools and freshly sawed lumber.

"Hammer and saw, hammer and saw,
One has sharp teeth, the other a claw."

A shadow silhouetted itself in the bright rectangle of doorway through which the hot sunshine streamed. Looking up, he saw with a quickening beat of the heart that it was Jane—but Jane with a troubled, serious look in her eyes.

"Your mother wants you to drive her over to the Stephens' right away. Aunt Lizzie's sick—maybe dying; Lottie telephoned over and said that her mother wanted to see Aunt Matty before it was too late . . . ."

Bart hurried to the barn and helped the stable boy harness Daisy and Dolly to the surrey. The Stephens' ranch was not more than three hundred yards from Los Robles' gate, but even that distance was too much for his cumbersome mother these days. In the past few months, she had seldom left the house, and then only to attend Mass at the Carterville church on Sundays or to move heavily about under the trees that sheltered the garden. Now, with difficulty, she was heaved and pushed into the rear seat of the vehicle which sagged to its axles beneath her weight.

"Send Bart back, if there's anything we can do," called Camilla from the veranda steps.

"What's the matter, Ma?" Bart asked, as he turned the horses' heads into the driveway; "what's up with Aunt Lizzie?"

"I guess it's *all* up with her," his mother answered, in a reserved, unencouraging tone. "Your Aunt Lizzie's pretty sick."

"What's wrong with her?"

"Well, it's—it's babies, I reckon. Her last one died, you know; poor Lizzie's lost one after another. I think the last four have all died."

Bart considered. His mother continued:

"She's never been any too strong, and having so many children has just worn her out. I'm afraid she's pretty far gone this time—at least, it sounded so from Lottie's voice. She may be passing on. And without the sacraments! Father Ginotti's away, and they can't locate his assistant. I 'phoned at once."

"Is she awfully sick?"

"Well, Lottie said she was pretty low and might not last through the day; said she'd like to have me come right over. . . . . My goodness, I haven't laid eyes on Lizzie for nearly three years! Reckon it's even longer than that. I hope your uncle Stephen's had a change of heart."

"What was all the row about, Ma?"

"Frankly I've never understood the rights or wrongs of it;

but your uncle Stephen was very pig-headed. I never did think he had much gumption."

Bart had had only occasional glimpses of the members of Stephen Carter's family in the past few years. Sometimes he had seen them driving down the road, or making purchases at the General Store in Carterville. He knew they were unfriendly, and he had been told to dislike and mistrust them. George, the oldest boy, had run away some time ago. Bart heard he had gone to sea. Frank, the next in line, was dissolute; he had once been arrested for drunkenness and fighting, and clapped into the Guadalupe caboose by the recently deceased sheriff. Of the other members of the family Bart knew very little. He understood that his uncle had been having a hard time, and—according to Philo—had borrowed the last penny he could from the Guadalupe National.

There was apparent plenty of evidence of money trouble about the Stephens' place as the surrey turned in at its gateless entrance and followed the dusty, wheel-tracked road that led from the highway up to its front porch. The brick walk was chipped and full of holes, the garden was a tangle of weeds, the long steps that ran the length of the porch were marred and splintered, the porch roof sagged, the house needed painting, was blistered and discolored, two of the front windows were broken.

In the tall, gaunt man with sparse stick-up hair, sad smile, and missing teeth, who came shambling out of the house to greet them, Bart was shocked to recognize his uncle.

"Well, Matty, this is very good of you, I'm sure," said he to Bart's mother; "Lizzie's pretty low; said she wanted to see you in case—well, in case anything happened; 'bout the children, I reckon. I promised her I'd send word, but I wasn't at all sure you'd come. . . . . 'Lo, Bart."

"How is she, Stephen?"

"The baby came last night, quite unexpected. Lizzie's been poorly, you know, Matty. She ain't carried any of her babies full time; that's the way it's been with her these last few years. This little fellow was only five months. Doctor came this morning, says she ain't rallied the way she ought. She got kind of scared, I reckon; said she'd feel better if she had a talk with you."

"Did you send for the priest?"

"I intended to do that, Matty, I tried to get Father—you know, that Italian fellow over in Guadalupe—but he's away . . . ."

Stephen Carter and his sister-in-law entered the house, the frail screen door clap-clapping behind them. Bart wrapped the reins about the whip, rested his feet upon the dashboard, and proceeded to roll a cigarette. A sly-looking boy about eighteen came out of the house and sat down on the steps.

"Chuck me the makings," said he.

Bart did so. It was some time since he had seen Jim, whom he remembered as a ragged, unmanageable, rowdyish fourteen-year-old, but this young man was grown up. There was sophistication in his eye; in spite of his worn and rough ranch clothing, there was an air of grooming about him. A good-looking lad, though his glance was shifty and his chin indefinite. They conversed in desultory manner.

"Your mother very sick?"

"Aw, she's always that way."

"Where's Frank?"

"Working for Bacigalupi over in San Geronimo."

"Working for Bacigalupi! Why, don't you need him here?"

"Naw. We got Japs now—skibbies! They're running the roost. What you going to do if you can't get pickers? I hear you got Hindoos."

"Yep. We're paying 'em dollar six bits a day. . . . . What's George doing? Ever hear from him?"

"Ma got a letter 'bout three weeks ago; came from Valparaiso. Says he's going to Rio. Guess he won't be home for a coon's age."

"How's Lottie and May?"

"Lottie's doing the cooking; May thinks she's helping. That kid can't wipe a dish."

"And what're you doing?"

"Hey, why all the catechism? . . . . Sitting round, feeding my face. Ain't that a good job?"

"Sure; I guess so."

Bart lapsed into silence, but, after a moment, asked for the return of his Durham and papers.

"I never see you down Guadalupe way Saturday nights," Jim observed. "Why don't you ever step out some time? Y'ever been to Sadie Joe's place? Swell dump."

"I don't go much on Guadalupe entertainment," Bart told him; "when I step out, I go to 'Frisco. Better show. . . . . Further away," he added significantly.

"Yea? When was you in 'Frisco?"

"'Bout three months ago."

"Yea? Well, ain't you getting stale? Ain't it about time you was stepping out again? I can show you a thing or two in Guadalupe that 'Frisco hasn't got. . . . . Say, why don't you come along with me some night? I'll give you a hot time. Believe me, it's hot in that village Saturday nights. I'll bet I can show you a better time than you ever had in 'Frisco."

Bart drew on his cigarette deeply and blew out a plume of smoke across the end of his nose. He assumed a bored, superior expression. The light of interest quickened in Jim's eye.

"Say, come off your high horse. How about next Saturday night? Will you come along or won't you?"

"I—I . . . . Well, I . . . ."

"Ah-h, you big four-flusher! You're a regular mama's boy. I don't believe you ever had a drink in your life!"

"Is *that* so?"

"Yes, that's so."

"Well, I'll come along, smarty, and drink you under the table."

"Yea? Well, we'll see about that. Bring a sack full of money. Sadie Joe charges a dollar to get into her dump, but the girls are worth it. Peacherinos, I tell you."

§ 2

Lizzie Carter did not die that day or night, nor for several months to come, and the following Saturday after sundown Bart went with Jim to Guadalupe. It was well toward ten o'clock before the boys reached town, for work at Los Robles was not over until sundown which was between seven and seven-thirty. Bart, pretending a headache through supper, excused himself, hurried to the corral, saddled Clown behind the barn, and met Jim in Carterville.

Their experiences were those which might happen to any eighteen- and nineteen-year-old boys bent on having a wild evening in a wide-open country town. Men, old and young, from all the ranches round about, flocked on this last night of the week to Guadalupe to enjoy laughter, music, gambling, drinking, and women. The saloons, billiard halls, and dives were operating at full blast. Light gushed in garish splendor from the brilliantly illuminated bars, glittering with polished glass, mirrors, and flamboyant beer or whisky signs. Card and roulette machines whirred and clicked, and occasionally there sounded a lucky trickle of nickels or quarters in a metal cup. Cowboys and ranch-hands rubbed elbows on the polished mahoganies, arguing and vociferating over their drinks. Discordant "close harmonies" arose in corners, and sometimes a fight started which was quickly quelled. Girls, singly and in couples—Mexican, Spanish, and Italian, for the most part—sauntered up and down the streets, ogling the men, who sometimes asked them into the back parlors of the bars and bought them drinks.

To an unaccustomed onlooker, it might have seemed more vicious than it really was. To Bart, it was shocking, somewhat alarming, and highly entertaining. Neither of the boys had any considerable money to spend. Lacking the price of admission to Sadie Joe's ribald joint, they attempted an entrance without payment, were summarily ejected, and consoled themselves by inviting two street-walkers, less brazen looking than the usual lot, to join them in a glass of beer. Bart had a definite fear of such women; they repelled rather than attracted him. But he loved the glitter of the saloons, the chummy association of older men at the bar, the occasional acquaintance who accosted him, the feeling that he was being at last accepted as a man among men.

He drank far too much, but he retained sufficient wit to find his horse toward three o'clock, clamber to his back, and head in the direction of home. The press of work at Los Robles brooked no observance of the Sabbath nor Mathilda's scruples; the picking, cutting, boxing, and shipping would go on as usual. Bart had left Jim in the company of a painted child of fifteen whom he was mauling with amorous embraces. The pony jogged dutifully homeward, but a good five miles from Carterville, Bart, nodding heavily in slumber, nodded too far to one side, pitched headlong to the road, while Clown jogged on without him. He tramped the remaining distance, sober and chagrined.

§ 3

Perhaps it was the recollection of the entwining arms and clinging kisses between Jim and the little Mexican strumpet which led Bart the next day to look speculatively at Pudgie Cook; perhaps it was something in the girl's eyes.

His reaction to his night of revel was curiously stimulating. All Sunday his nerves were on edge; he had no definite symptom of discomfort but nevertheless felt decidedly sickish. He had reached home, bedraggled, footsore, and exhausted, a little before five in the morning, had first satisfied himself that the pinto was safely in the barn, had unsaddled and turned him loose in the corral, and then, in the gray of dawn, had cautiously let himself into the house by the rear door. Camilla was already in the kitchen starting breakfast. She eyed him for a puzzled moment, then, as he stood sheepishly before her, with enlightenment and a sorrowful head shake.

"Better take your shoes off," she cautioned, turning to rake the half-dead embers in the stove.

All day long his mind dwelt on the occurrences of the night. He was conscious of no wish to relive them. Their memory lingered, and that sufficed for the time.

By six-thirty o'clock he was at work, the blows of his hammer jolting his head like so many raps upon his skull. At seven, he saw the surrey being driven from the barn to take the girls to church. Jane emerged from the house, pulling on the mannish gloves in which she always drove, and at sight of her a twinge of sharp contrition swept over him. For several minutes after the surrey had departed, he sat staring at the hammer in his hand and the unfinished box between his knees, thinking of the girl's innocence and purity, wondering what she would say and do if she should know of his depravity.

A young voice with a husky burr to it broke in upon his reverie.

"Goodness me! Why the brown study?"

He raised his head with a jerk, abashed and confused. Pudgie Cook's funny grinning mug was peering in at him through the open doorway. He answered with an embarrassed smile.

"You know, I never heard the bell this morning! I'm late as the Dickens. D'y' suppose I'll get fired? Ma was late too; she didn't start breakfast until six."

"I was up at five," Bart stated truthfully.

"It's going to be a scorcher."

"Yes, I guess so."

"I don't mind the hot weather, do you?"

"Oh, not unless it gets too awful."

"Well, of course, I don't like it myself then."

"To-day's going to be fierce all right."

"Ah, you bet; I don't like it when it gets too hot."

"Neither do I."

"I cut my finger yesterday, and that's going to slow me up to-day." Pudgie held up a bandaged finger and pouted.

"Too bad."

"I made the record for the summer so far on Friday; I did twenty-three."

"Is zat right? I heard of a girl who did twenty-six once. She worked over at my uncle Stephen's, but somebody said afterwards the boxes weren't full."

"I think I could do twenty-five. I've done one better each day since I've been here. But now . . . ." she grimaced ruefully at the wrapped finger.

"Why don't you try packing?"

The girl's small face puckered into further distortion, and she shook her head.

"Un-*un;* not for mine. I can do better than one fifty cutting 'cots, crippled as I am. I'm going to try, anyway."

Neither spoke for a moment, then their eyes found one another's. Pudgie ran a finger tip along the sill of the doorway, which was waist high.

"I wish you'd come over and have supper with us some night," she said, bending to examine closely her traveling nail; "Ma cooks simply out of sight; she's great with onions. There's only six of us down there in our camp—six besides Ma—and we're all pals, girls I've chummed with all my life in 'Lupe; Ossip's there, and you know Stel' McGonigle? Some of the fellows come over at night, and we sit round the fire and sing and have lots of fun. I thought maybe you might drop in last evening; I don't know why I thought so, but I just did. I suppose," she said with a pout, puckered eyebrows, and queer little catch in her voice, "it wouldn't do for the mighty Bart Carter to come over and hobnob with just a lot of cutter girls." Then her brown face broke into a mass of wrinkles, and she grinned at him, showing little white teeth.

"The mighty Bart Carter!" Long after she had gone, the phrase stayed with him.

"The mighty Bart Carter!"

"Darned little fool," Bart said, dismissing her, but the expression kept coming back to him, and her funny brown mug with its turned-up nose and close-set eyes.

That evening, when he tried to describe in his diary the gay night of revel in Guadalupe, his thoughts persisted in turning to her pouting face. But he would not let himself write of her; that would be giving her too much importance; she didn't amount to anything . . . . she wasn't significant . . . . didn't matter. . . . .

"The mighty Bart Carter . . . . !"

§ 4

Frank Gardiner came over from Gilroy that Sunday afternoon, taking the stage to Guadalupe and cycling the rest of the way. Although Bart hardly saw him when he was on the ranch, since he was never out of Camilla's company, it gave him a pleasant feeling to know he was there. He wanted to tell him about his wicked night in the neighboring town, to scandalize him if he could, but he rather suspected that Frank would neither be impressed nor interested. He decided to write a poem, a lewd and shocking one, about a street-walker and a dive, and make Frank wonder where he could have learned about such sordid vice. So, for the last two hours of the afternoon, while the sun was slowly sinking, and he was supposed to be briskly at his box-making, he bent over a smooth piece of pine board scribbling upon it the ribald lines of his verses.

At seven-fifteen, the ding-donging of the ranch bell announced the end of work, and Bart hurried to his room to wash up for the evening meal, the pine board tucked beneath his arm.

Supper, Sunday, was unusually simple and always the same; it was the China-boy's afternoon off. It consisted of a large round pan of browned baked beans, apple pie, and, for some reason never clearly understood by anybody, hot chocolate. There was always too, a large bowl of whipped cream, and Tilly invariably went about the table, leaning elaborately over each sitter's shoulder, flecking gobs of it into the big round cups.

Mrs. Carter did not come down that evening; she was not feeling particularly well, her older daughters reported. They had prevailed upon her to remain in bed and have a tray. Philo was in his usual place at the foot of the table. On his left was his daughter Josephine, Bart next, and then Frank Gardiner. Opposite sat Jane, Jack, and Trudie. Camilla and Tilly, whose chairs were on either side of their mother's vacant place, did not sit down until the others had been served.

Bart, glancing about the circle, was aware of unusual elation. The discomfort he had experienced earlier in the day had completely passed, some of his verses had pleased him, Frank Gardiner's presence stimulated him, and there was Jane—Jane looking startlingly lovely in a plain green gingham with a spray of mignonette tucked into the coil of her fair hair. Others commented on her appearance, and every now and then Bart found his eyes wandering to her sweet, animated face. No matter what she had said the other evening in the dark of the trees, he felt she could not remain indifferent to him; she knew now that he loved her, and he had read somewhere that love begets love. He was satisfied to wait.

Camilla, too, was in a gentle, happy mood. She always became subdued and silent when Frank Gardiner was present. Staunch friends they had grown to be after ten years' devotion; they enjoyed a mutual regard and understanding; Bart had never heard them disagree.

At the height of the table's inconsequential chatter, noises arose outside. There were heard the slow crunch of wheels in the gravel, a horse's hooves, a man's voice, "You're quite welcome, Father," a heavy, masculine tread on the veranda. The talk ceased, looks were exchanged, and Tilly in agitation rose and hurried to the door. Then came the squeak of the screen hinge and the girl's wild burst.

"Why, it's Francis! It's Father Francis!"

He was among them in a moment, a tall, reserved man of twenty-nine, pale, dark-haired, with a lined, lean face full of character. None of them had seen him for two years, and then but for a few hours of an afternoon, when he had stopped to visit them on his way to assume his parish duties in far-away Santa Anna. They swarmed around him—brothers, sisters, cousins. He embraced the girls and wrung the men's hands. Bart, excited and eager, relieved him of his dusty bag and soft-brimmed hat.

"Why, Francis Carter! I never would have known you!"

"It's the good Father himself!"

"How *are* you, your Reverence?"

"Oh, Mama will be simply out of her senses!"

The excited exclamations rose in clamorous babble, but the newcomer would give no account of himself until he had seen his mother, and bounded upstairs in search of her.

When he had gone, Tilly burst into tears. She had to be made to sit in a chair and drink a glass of water before she could control herself.

"It's so won-wonderful to have him back," she sobbed, mopping her eyes; "but why—why d-didn't he let us know?"

He had written more than a fortnight ago, so he assured them when he was once more in their midst. The letter must have miscarried. Anyway, he was to be with them for two glorious weeks of vacation. The Bishop wanted him to go on a three-months' tour of the state, to visit Catholic seminaries and colleges, expounding to young men the exceptional opportunities awaiting those who might feel they had vocations. He was enthusiastic over his mission, but the Bishop had generously insisted that he take a holiday first. So he was to be with his family for a whole blessed fortnight of freedom, with no sick to be visited, no weddings or baptisms to perform, no confessions to hear, no clerical duties of any kind. He hoped to be permitted, with Father Ginotti's approval, to say Sunday Masses at the little church in Carterville, but that would be all joy—a recreation.

He ate heartily of the jelly omelette Camilla had had time to prepare while he was upstairs; he enjoyed his hot beans too, and asked Tilly for a second cup of chocolate. Matty, clad in a voluminous wrapper, her scanty gray pigtail wound about her head and partially concealed by a beruffled lace cap, descended ponderously to the dining room and sat serenely beaming in her accustomed place. The rest grouped themselves about this revered though unfamiliar member of the family, some in chairs, some leaning across the table, chins in palms, all intent upon the pale, strong face with its easy smile and its wise, kindly, understanding eyes, aglow now with the emotion of his homecoming and the warmth of their welcome.

His mother was anxious to regale him at once with a tale of the deplorable state of affairs in Uncle Stephen's household. She spoke guardedly before the listening girls, and Bart could see that his brother could make neither head nor tail of what she meant to convey. Philo found the subject distasteful and sat scowling, irritably fingering his silverware.

". . . . and I assure you, Father, none of them have had the Sacraments since Heaven knows when!"

Camilla diverted her mother with:

"Tell us about Santa Anna, Francis——"

" 'Father'—please, Camilla!"

"Oh, no-no-no-no-no-*no;* I'm 'Francis' to all of you and must always be so."

"You like it down there?"

"Oh, very much; but the distances are appalling. You waste so much time on the trolley cars. It's a large parish."

"And the climate?"

"Ah, the climate!"

"Oh, my-my! I do wish the boys could come down from the city while you're here!"

"Why don't you write them?"

"I believe I will; and Eva Ann, too."

"What's Gill doing this summer? I think you wrote that Josh was living with Aunt Gertrude?"

"Bart went up and saw all of them a little while ago."

"You're growing up, Bart; you're at least a head taller than when I last saw you. Let me see . . . . how old are you? Nineteen?"

"Yes, sir; last April."

"What're you doing?"

"Oh, working round the place."

"Behaving yourself?"

"Trying to, sir"—with a nervous laugh and blush.

"And they let you go to the city, hey? How did you find your sister and brothers?"

Eagerly recounting what he knew of Eva Ann and the boys, Bart experienced a wave of admiration for this priestly brother. He was a regular fellow, and what eyes! He felt Francis could see right into the innermost recesses of his soul.

"And when, pray, are you and our good Frank, here, going to end this long waiting business?" the priest asked Camilla, catching her hand affectionately as she leaned across his shoulder for his plate.

"Ah, we'll have to talk to you about that. . . . . Next year, maybe."

"She's always saying that—'next year'—'next year.' I don't think she's ever going to marry me."

Bart noticed the eyes of his young cousin, Peggy. They were riveted upon his eldest brother's face, and the ardent intensity in them was like a shining light.

"You're fine folk," Father Francis was saying, "a fine family. I'm proud of you; I'm proud to belong here. With all the sin and corruption in the world, with all the Godlessness and—and the selfishness I see about me, it's refreshing to drop in upon such a happy group, and find you all here sitting round the supper table, merry, loving one another, simple and contented. . . . ."

"If he only knew!" reflected Bart. His eyes traveled to his uncle's dark, somber face. "Murderer!" he thought.

The circle broke up presently. Trudie and Peggy followed Tilly to the kitchen to wash up the supper dishes; Matty ponderously climbed the stairs once more, her oldest son promising to join her in her bedroom shortly; Uncle Philo went to his office. Camilla and Frank Gardiner strolled to the veranda, found seats on the lower treads of the front steps, their linked fingers hidden by a fold of the girl's dress; Jane and Jack settled themselves behind them, with Josephine and Bart on the opposite side. Father Francis, established in their midst, attempted to enjoy a dry cigar Philo had found for him.

It was oppressively warm; a heavy, enervating moisture ladened the air; it seemed to weigh upon one, to press in from the side; there was no relief in a long breath. Moths fluttered helplessly against screened doors and windows, fruit flies buzzed, an occasional mosquito drew a slap and a sharp exclamation from one of the girls. The sky was sprinkled thickly with pale stars, and a languid moon hung haphazardly above the indefinite shadow of the tank house. There was not so much as a faint whisper of breeze. The scent of decaying fruit tainted the night, and there were other odors: the smell of paint and turpentine, of axle grease and oil, of freshly sawed pine wood, of manure in the corral, and the hot, aromatic hay-and-animal smell from the great barn, while every now and then came a vagrant whiff of camp-fire smoke. Beyond the cutting and packing sheds, from over by Guadalupe Creek, and again from the region about the barn, the corrals, and the line of cottages beneath the row of eucalyptus trees, rose a barely distinguishable hum—the drone of hundreds: pickers, cutters, packers, Chinese, Hindoos, Mexicans, stable boys, cow-men, and vaqueros, murmuring, murmuring, murmuring—a smothered bourdon of distant talk and laughter.

"That is the whole philosophy of existence," Father Francis was saying: "we must live to serve, and in serving only is there life."

Bart rose quietly and went indoors. His mind was upon the verses he had composed that afternoon; he wanted to show them to Frank

"The hot burn of her red lips
Sears the trembling answer of my mouth."

He copied the lines hastily on a sheet of paper. The poem was unfinished, but he did not care. He was eager to have Frank's opinion of it.

But when he descended, to his keen disappointment, the veranda was deserted. He seated himself forlornly upon the top step, took out his papers and tobacco, rolled a cigarette. Minutes passed. He sat there disconsolately, the high spirits of the evening evaporating. Snatching his poem from his pocket, he twisted the paper into a hard coil and flung it into a tangle of rose bushes.

"That's always the way it is," he said in disgust; "there's no place for me; nobody thinks about me; nobody wants me; nobody gives a hang."

His resentful thoughts passed from Frank Gardiner to Jane. "*She* might have waited," he reflected.

Flicking away the stub of his cigarette with a fillip of a finger against his thumb, he dug his hands into his trouser pockets, crossed the graveled driveway, and strolled aimlessly over the weedy, unkempt lawn.

Almost immediately he came upon two figures seated on the grass. They were upon the far side of the monkey tree, screened from the house by its thick, curving, hairy branches. Halting, Bart stood irresolutely in the shadow. At first he supposed the pair to be Camilla and Frank Gardiner. As he hesitated, he saw the man's arms go about the girl, saw her raise her head to his, and their lips meet long and lingeringly in a kiss.

The sight struck straight at his heart. A knot came in his throat; congestion rushed to his head. He remained transfixed, sensing some terrible thing about to happen to him. Even before the green color of the dress had identified her, he knew the girl was Jane! Jane and . . . . and . . . . He could not see through the darkness, but in some way, he was sure of the man. The kiss ended, the pair moved, but their hands still clung to one another's. And then Bart heard her companion speak. That voice! It was *Jack's!*

He stole away, hastening more recklessly as the distance grew, striding with faster step, hurrying, hurrying—flying from that scene of horror and iniquity for only could he think he had caught his brother and the girl in lustful sin.

Incest, adultery, words of frightful import stormed through his mind. Ah, this was the end of them all! This would disrupt the family—break up the ranch—kill his mother—scatter them to the four winds of heaven—end in death . . . .

And only an hour ago their brother, the priest, had been saying:

"We must live to serve, and in serving only is there life."

"*T-ah!*"

The exclamation broke from him in anger and disgust.

"Who's there?" A voice arrested him, and a white figure disengaged itself from the shadow of wild lilac bushes beside the creek.

He stopped, heart pounding. About him pressed the hot, enervating night, rank with mixed smell, throbbing with unseen life.

"Who's there?" The demand came again.

Bart thought he recognized the accent—a woman's. For an interval both waited.

"Who are *you?*" he queried truculently.

Another silence; then a girlish laugh in the darkness.

Pudgie Cook!

In distaste he drew back, half turning away.

"You frightened the wits out of me," came her voice. "I thought you were one of the Hindoos. It's me, Pudgie. . . . . What are you doing down here at this time of night?"

"Oh, just taking a walk."

"You seem to be in an awful hurry."

"I didn't see where I was going."

"Well, you'd 've been in the crick in another jiffy."

Bart hesitated. He had no wish for talk with this garrulous creature; he wanted to be alone, alone with his thoughts. He was at a loss to know how to beat a retreat. As she approached, he could distinguish her pale face and her funny turned-up nose in the darkness. She wore a white sailor blouse with a red tie at the opening of the neck.

"I was up here getting some water from the crick. Ma wanted to put some beans to soak."

She set a bucket on the ground at her feet.

"We're further down," she continued, as if he had asked a question; "Stel—that's Stella McGonigle who's with us—was washing out some of her things in the crick before supper, and, you know, there's a kind of a little pool where we are, sort of a back eddy where there's not much current, and Ma thought maybe the water might be soapy, so I came up here."

She stopped on an odd catch in her voice.

Bart stood uncomfortably facing her in the steamy dusk. He could think of nothing to say. He wanted her to go, or to go himself. . . . . Back there, sheltered by the hideous monkey tree with its hairy, waving arms, his brother and Jane were . . . . Ah, God! He could not finish the thought! What would his mother say when she found out? What would Philo? What would Francis, the priest? Merciful Mother of God, was it his duty to inform on them?

"Ma feels awfully nervous with all those Hindoos about," Pudgie observed.

"They're perfectly harmless; they'll keep to themselves."

"She says she doesn't like it here any more; she wants to go back to 'Lupe."

"They won't bother you."

"Well, I know; that's what we've been telling her, but . . . ."

Again the queer catch in her voice. This time the half smothered sob was unmistakable.

"What's the trouble?" he asked uncertainly.

"Oh, nothing."

"Anything I can do? I can speak to my uncle. Maybe he'll move their camp."

"That's not what's the matter. . . . . It's—it's Ossip."

"Ossip?"

"My sister."

He remembered. People generally said Ossip Cook was half-witted.

Pudgie flung back her head and gazed up at the murky stardom overhead; Bart guessed she was winking back tears.

"Oh, it isn't anything," she went on in a braver tone; "Ossip's flighty, you know. She's been running with a Portugee boy, one of the milkers; I don't even know his name. She was out with him last night—at least, we think she was—and she didn't come in until all hours, and to-night, right after supper, she sneaked away again. Said she was going to buy some chocolate over at the cook-house, and she isn't back yet! Ma's simply crazy, and she takes it out on me. Says she won't stay here another week; says she's going to pack up an' go back to 'Lupe on Saturday! . . . . It isn't the Hindoos," Pudgie finished on a quick laughing quaver, turning abruptly and looking up at him.

"They wouldn't harm anybody, I'm sure," Bart managed to say awkwardly.

"I'm not worrying a bit about them!" the girl exclaimed scornfully. "Ossip's behaving like an utter fool, and Ma threatens to take us all back to town. That's what's bothering me."

"You don't want to go?"

"No, I love it here. I like—oh, I like the whole place; I like the excitement and the noise and the bustle and the fuss an' everything."

"I like that, too."

"I bet you do."

"But that's all I *do* like about it."

"Why, how do you mean?"

"I hate the place; I'm crazy to get away."

"Where?"

"No place in particular; just get away."

"Aren't you happy?"

"No." The discontent in his tone was eloquent.

"Bart!"

For a long moment neither spoke.

"Why aren't you happy?" There was a gentle tenderness in her voice now.

He shook his head. His mind was back there with the two shadowy figures clinging to one another behind the shelter of the malevolent tree. A tiny groan escaped him, and he passed uncertain fingers across his eyes.

A hand, a gentle little hand found his—rough, affectionate, as light as eiderdown. His throat contracted with pain; he bit his lips.

"Oh, Bart dear, I'm sorry. . . . ."

They stood close beside each other, silent, motionless, their hearts weighted with their troubles, their need of sympathy drawing them together. Presently he was aware of the pressure of the girl's head against his shoulder and the small hand tucked within his elbow. Simply he put his arms about her. She melted into them as if she belonged there, surrendering herself to their circle, raising her childish face and lips confidently for his kiss. And with the touch of her mouth, a soft, tender, loving mouth, the need of her affection, the need of the outpouring of his own, rose in him like a tumultuous tide, plunging up from somewhere deep down within him, breaking all bonds, gushing from some pent-up source, sweeping aside all consideration, all hesitancy, all prudence, all thought. With an encompassing crush, he folded her to him and pressed his lips again and again to hers, the prick of tears stinging his eyes, pain and fierce anguish wringing his heart.

There was no end to their kisses. It was as if both were starving, as if their very breath depended upon their kissing—more and more. As soon as their lips parted, they sought one another's again in a new clinging contact. The blood throbbed in Bart's temples, his hands grew hot and wet, he could feel the girl trembling as he pressed her to him, drawing her closer and closer until it seemed as though she were a part of him.

Suddenly she wilted, collapsed as if she had fainted. To his whisper of alarm, she breathed a feeble reassurance. She lay limp and drooping in the circle of his arm; so small she was, so weak and puny. She was like a very little girl, hardly more than a child. Looking down at her, he saw the soft brown clear throat where the rumpled neck of her blouse fell away, noted her turned-up, funny nose, her close-set eyes . . . .

Slowly his brain cleared, his eyes traveling up to the tops of the tall wild lilac bushes above the river bank. He could hear the tumble and gush of water on the rocks below, the stirring in the dry leaves of some marauding animal, the strident singing of crickets, and the shrill crackle of frogs. Through the shrubbery, there winked the glow of a camp fire—the figure of a Chinaman silhouetted against it—and faintly across the intervening space were wafted the strange odors of joss sticks, cheap tobacco, dried fish, and burning eucalyptus leaves. Above the lilac tops hung the low heavens, spangled with a million dead stars. The night lay upon the earth in suffocating airlessness.

The girl stirred, disengaged herself, straightened scarf and blouse.

"I'll be back," she whispered; "wait here. I've got to take this bucket to Ma; she'll be beginning to wonder and start calling; I won't be more than a minute."

She squeezed his arm and disappeared in the darkness. But it was more than a minute before she returned; it was nearer five, and when she sought Bart among the lilac shadows, he was not there. He had fled.

CHAPTER IV

§ 1

HIS left hand supporting his head and thrust deep into the tangle of his thick hair, the fingers of his right stained to the knuckles with ink, Bart wrote on and on. It was one o'clock, two hours since he had obeyed a sudden and, to him, inexplicable impulse to run away.

> "I do not understand myself [he wrote]; I cannot account for either my emotions or my reactions. I'm an enigma as much to others as to myself. One moment I believe in my sincerity; the next I am convinced I am only acting, gesturing, making a grandstand play. I am God's handiwork, and to Him alone am I comprehensible!"

In making the final exclamation point, he drove his pen point through the page, dropped the holder, and, exhausted, leaned his face in both hands. The lamp beside him began to complain with guttural noises, its dying flame to skirt its wick in rapid circling flights.

The boy groaned with weariness. Presently he slowly parted the fingers that covered his eyes, and once more they found the pages of the diary. Turning back, he read what he had written, read it through with determined self-restraint until he had finished; then, with an exclamation of exasperation, he tore the thin sheets from the book, crumpled them in his hands, and flung them to the floor.

"Oh, damn—damn—damn!" he cried aloud. "What's the use? . . . . . Wallowing in self-conceit, enjoying myself, reveling in self-analysis! Why can't I be normal? Why can't I be like other fellows? Why can't I be honest with myself?"

Impatiently, he freed himself from his clothes, blew out the lamp, fell upon his knees in hasty prayer, then plunged into bed, dragging the light sheet over his shoulders, and in another minute was asleep.

But the next day, bending over his carpentry, rapping the shingle nails into place with quick, authoritative blows, the perturbations of the night before returned to him with double force.

It was mid-morning. The area between the cutting and packing sheds was vibrant with noise and color. The buildings swarmed with men and boys, women and girls. The hubbub was like the clamor of a school yard at recess. Fumes of sulphur polluted the air; the sulphur house had just been opened, and two men were dragging out the trays of apricots, carrying them to the hillside where before noon they would be withered by the merciless sun.

Bart had gone early to work, fearing an encounter with Pudgie. He had not seen her, nor had she stopped, as she sometimes did on her way to the cutting shed, to lean her bare elbows on the high sill of his shop's doorway, for a minute's gossip. He had had no glimpse of Jane either, but now the sight of Jack, bawling directions to the truck boy whose horses had become entangled in their harness, brought back sharply the dreadful situation confronting him.

What was he to do, if anything, about his brother and Jane? Was it possible there was only innocent love-making in their embraces? Bart considered himself too worldly-wise to accept such an explanation. Marriage between them, Jane herself had said was an impossibility. They were cousins—second cousins, perhaps, but cousins nevertheless—and their union was definitely banned by the Church. That had been Jane's excuse, Bart reminded himself, for rejecting his own suit. Yet she showed no hesitancy in giving herself to Jack. She preferred Jack to him; so much was obvious. But she had not had the courage to tell Bart the fact the night he had declared himself. It was that thought which rankled now.

Where was she headed with Jack? God knew, the boy said fiercely to himself, he loved her, and was willing to give everything he had to protect her! Jack was twenty-three, old enough to know what he was about. . . . . Jack, the admirable, the respected, the model example, his mother's pride, his uncle's favorite! Jane, the darling of all hearts! What would Francis, the priest, have to say? Again Bart asked himself, was it his duty to go to this eldest brother, who was wise, understanding, and tell him what he knew? Might that avert an otherwise inevitable catastrophe?

Jane and Jack! . . . . Pudgie and himself!

His thoughts switched to the girl he had kissed and held in his arms the night before. Just what did he think of her, this common little cutter girl with her soft, loving lips, her clinging hands, her adoration? Just what was his interest in her? Did he love her—really love her? He could not answer. Certainly he held her in no such esteem as he did Jane; a comparison of his feelings for the two girls would have been an insult to his cousin. Yet this curious child with her turned-up nose and close-set eyes drew him—drew him strongly. The memory of her small, yielding body, her frailness as he held her to him, her tender, hungry lips, sent wave after wave of hot yearning through him. She loved him ardently, whole-heartedly. Of that he was sure. Nobody had ever cared for him before, no one had ever cared very much for him one way or another, unless it was his uncle, who hated him.

Hard upon these reflections came once again the vision of golden-haired Jane—so beautiful, so sweet, so fine, so much admired, so good, so pure. . . . . But *was* she?

The circle of his thoughts spun an endless wheel, until his head ached.

The whole family assembled for noonday dinner, Mathilda in a flowing percale, serene and contemplative at her place at the table's head, Father Francis, beside her, with his pale, lined countenance and smiling, appreciative eyes, Jack and Jane in gleeful spirits, the rest attentive. Bart watched, his gaze traveling from the dour looks of his silent uncle to Tilly's simpering smirks. It was entirely obvious to himself that Jack and Jane were in love, and he was surprised that the others did not notice it. What satisfaction would their love bring to them? Were they ready to enjoy each other incestuously beneath the very roof that sheltered them?

Watching them laughing, skylarking, was more than flesh could endure. He made his escape, hurrying back to his work, and almost at the very door of his shop came face to face with Pudgie Cook.

"Oh!"

They both stood still. He could see the brown of her face deepen. She looked away, her gaze wavering; she brought it back, raising dark, questioning eyes to his.

"I—I didn't mean to run away last night," he said awkwardly.

She steadily regarded him. When her face was serious, it lost all its attractiveness. Only when she grinned and her brown mug wrinkled was she cute and appealing.

"I am sorry I didn't wait to say good-bye," he began again.

"Oh, that was all right." Her tone was dead.

"I was feeling awfully low," he continued. "I had something on my mind, something that was worrying me a lot. I was afraid if I waited till you came back, I would tell you about it, and I just couldn't do that. It wasn't my secret."

Her eyes searched him.

"Oh, that was all right," she repeated. Her face was still sober. Something pathetic in it tore at his heart.

"Ah—hh —Pudgie!" he said impulsively.

She smiled then, a wan, dreary smile. A desire to take her in his arms, to crush his lips to hers, engulfed him. Vertigo. His throat and mouth went dry; he swallowed painfully.

"I'll see you soon; we'll talk things over," he told her. "I can't to-night," he hastened to add; "my brother Francis is here. I'll have to stay home. He'd think it funny if I went out."

He passed her then, placed one hand on the door sill of his shop, leaped within, and in a moment his brisk hammering was added to the general din of the fruit yard.

§ 2

The hot afternoon slowly wore itself out; at ten minutes after seven the iron clapper of the ranch bell rang out the welcome notes of quitting time. Bart hurried home, scrubbed the resin from his hands, donned a clean white shirt, his best trousers, and descended to the family circle, to suffer again to the laughing eyes of Jane and Jack. He was certain, during supper, their fingers were linked together beneath the edge of the tablecloth.

Once more their glances and their doting looks proved too much for him. He would have liked to stay and listen to Father Francis, but he could not endure the situation. Murmuring an excuse, he slipped away and ran, raging, upstairs to his small hot room beneath the eaves. There he flung himself on the bed, mouthing his wrist, searching with unseeing eyes the cracked, discolored plaster of the sloping ceiling. In an hour, two at the most, out there on the lawn, behind the protection of the monkey tree, or in some other concealing shrubbery, they would be kissing, clinging together . . . .

Time passed. Bart twisted on his narrow cot. His headache returned. He was weary of thinking, weary of the merciless cycle wheeling through his brain. A growing hunger, and increasing need of sympathy, of gentle soothing hands, and sweet confiding love mounted in him. Suddenly he roused himself, tiptoed to the door, and bent an ear over the banister. He could hear voices in the sitting room: Father Francis' clerical accents, his mother's measured words, Philo's bass. He caught from the priest, "The Bishop, I feel sure, would consider it within his spiritual authority."

Gently he shut the door; a smile of happy anticipation lighted his face. Carefully he climbed through the window, edged himself around the protruding gable, scrambled up the roof, slid down its other side, lowered himself with a hand gripping a drain pipe to the roof of the storeroom, and lightly leaped to the ground. Then with a springing step and a singing heart, he made off in the direction of the creek.

§ 3

Two days later, it was gushing Tilly who broke to him the news that Jane and Jack were to be married immediately, that Father Francis had agreed to sponsor the match, and had obtained a full dispensation from the Bishop.

"After all, you know, Bart dear, they're only *second* cousins. Isn't it simply wonderful? Dear, darling Jackie and adorable Jane! Think of them, joined in holy wedlock, man and wife forevermore! . . . . Jackie and Janey went straight to Father Francis, and then he told Mama and Uncle and said right away he didn't think there would be any need for getting Rome's approval, since Papa and Uncle were never more than first cousins and these were their children; he said he felt sure the Bishop would be willing to grant the dispensation. So he went to see our own dear pastor, and both of them wrote the Bishop at once, and the answer came this morning. Jackie and Janey are going to be married next Saturday! Just *think* of it! Uncle Philo says he can spare Jack for a week then, and Father Francis is going to marry them and say the nuptial Mass himself. You see, he has to leave a week from Sunday, and he says it will give him such joy to marry his own brother in the church Papa built for the Faith. There's no real reason why the young people *should* wait; it isn't as if either of them wanted to go away to live. They're going to stay right here with us. Isn't it sweet?"

Yes, wasn't it sweet? Bart was conscious only of humiliation, conscious that in all the rejoicings and congratulations he was the only one ignored and forgotten.

Jane came to him after supper the same evening, and slipped a hand through his arm as he stood at the top of the veranda steps.

"You're glad for me, aren't you, Bart?" she asked.

He started. His thoughts were down by the wild lilac bushes; in half an hour Pudgie would be waiting for him there.

"It's always been Jack, Bart, ever since I can remember—anyhow, ever since Father and the girls and I came here to live with Aunt Matty. I couldn't tell you so the other night. It seemed so hopeless—I mean about Jack and me. And then Father Francis came, and I went to him and told him about it, and he said he thought the Bishop would grant a dispensation. . . . . Bart, I'm terribly happy, and I don't want one single thing to spoil it, and it would, you know, if I didn't think you were happy too. Tell me you are, Bart dear; we've always been like brother and sister . . . ."

He put his arm about her and kissed her, and she kissed him warmly in return on the lips, but, loving her as he felt sure he did, the contact of her in his arms, her lips against his own, did not stir him as did the other's . . . . Curious how things were!

"Ah, Jane. I do hope you'll be happy, and I'd rather Jack had you than any other man I know." He meant it. Jack was a fine fellow. Bart was not drawn to him as to Gill or Josh; but there was nothing wrong with Jack; he was a good sort. Oddly his jealousy seemed entirely to have disappeared.

§ 4

More than once during the next few days, his thoughts turned toward Camilla. He wondered what she was thinking during the excitement of wedding plans which filled the house. Poor Camilla, who for ten years had steadfastly given her devotion to one man, and who had never received a word of encouragement from any of her kinsfolk. They needed her. The work of her brains and hands was too necessary to them; no one would bring him or herself to look kindly upon a match which would take her from them. Good old Camilla! It was all right for her to be engaged to impecunious, dreamy Frank Gardiner; no one had any objection to that, but there must be no thought of marrying, leaving them to make her own home and bear her own children!

Pigs—selfish, inconsiderate pigs—all of them, Bart decided resentfully, and with the thought there came again to him the memory of the words of his brother, the priest:

"We must live to serve, and in serving only is there life."

Well, perhaps there was truth in that, but Bart didn't see how it worked out in Camilla's case.

§ 5

Every night at nine o'clock, he stole down to the wild lilac bushes beside the creek, and there Pudgie would be waiting for him. Unhesitatingly she would come to him, surrendering herself to his arms, burying her turned-up nose in the hollow of his shoulder, sighing contentedly, joyously, as he folded her to him.

What was he to do with her? She poured out her love for him in a flood that frightened him. Passionate, fervent, exact-ing, she desired her man; Bart was hers, he belonged to her, and almost with their second meeting she made him aware of it.

Marry her? He was a long way from being willing to go that far. But suppose, he said to himself, he made up his mind to do so and went to his mother and uncle with such a suggestion? How certain he was of their laughter, their ridicule! Not one of the family would take him seriously—not even Trudie!

Bart marry? Why, Bart was nothing but a boy, still in his teens! He couldn't earn his own living, let alone a wife's! Bart with his daydreams and his moonings! He'd much better be thinking about nailing up fruit boxes, whitewashing trees, and doing other odd jobs about the place! . . . . And Pudgie Cook! She was no match for anybody; certainly not one of the Carters. Why, she was a little nobody, a flibbertigibbet out of Guadalupe! Her father had been a horseshoer before Captain Dan had made him sheriff. And her sister! That Ossip! Why, she was a scandal! She ought to be shut up for the good of the community. The girl was half-witted. Nobody knew with how many men she was carrying on!

No, not one of them would think kindly of such an idea. Yet Pudgie confidently expected him to marry her; she talked about it continually.

"When can we be married, Bart darling? When can we go and live together and have a home of our own and be together forever and forever? It needn't be more than a cabin. I simply hate it with Ma and Ossip; it's just hell for me, and nobody appreciates you in your family. You're unhappy, and I'm miserable, and we need each other. . . . . Oh, Bart darling, when can it be?"

"Well, Pudgie, I don't see how we could manage——"

"We could do it somehow, Bart darling. People don't starve. We'd pick fruit in the summer-time, and I'd cut 'cots, and we'd find jobs in the canneries. We'd sleep out in the open if we had to, and travel from place to place. I'd work my fingers to the bone for you. Oh, Ma makes it so hard for me! She's always rowing and scolding and raising the roof. I honestly don't think Ossip would behave as she does, if Mama was a little kinder. She went at Ossip with a stick last night, and Ossip just got up and left and didn't come back to camp until some awful hour this morning. Bart darling, I can't stand it. You simply have *got* to take me away. I'll run off if you don't."

If she only would! he thought.

But was he really ready to lose her so easily? Was he entirely willing to relinquish the soft clinging hands and the loving lips? . . . . No, he did not want to give her up just yet. Pudgie had grown to mean a great deal to him. She was all understanding, all sympathy, all love. He needed such things in his life. He could not let her go. Yet how hold her?

He considered going to Frank Gardiner and asking advice. But instinct told him the shy, retiring man would only urge him to do nothing which might plunge them all into unpleasant consequences, and within twenty-four hours, Bart was sure, Frank would have told Camilla all about it! He considered Father Francis, and of confessing everything to him. But here too, the door seemed shut. His brother did not know Pudgie, would not understand. Bart mentally visualized the hurt in that fine esthetic face! Father Francis liked and admired him; Bart saw real affection in the man's eyes. He hesitated to bring pain and disillusionment. In any case, he was sure of what the priest would say: the relationship must end, Bart must put the girl out of his life, never see her again; that was the duty he owed his mother, his brothers, his sisters. Bart plainly heard him saying it. To another priest, he might have knelt in the sanctum of the confessional and opened his heart. But to carry his problem to Father Francis was more than he could bring himself even to contemplate.

Poor Pudgie, fingering the shirt collar at his throat, looking up at him with brown eyes shining with love!

§ 6

The wedding was a grand success. Tilly, Trudie, and Peggy spent all of Friday decorating the church; they lined the chancel rail with phlox, and filled the bare corners with masses of pink and blue hydrangeas; yellow marigolds and vivid zinnias brightened the narrow niches of the gothic-shaped windows, and the altar itself was festooned with redwood garlands. Its white and gold altar cloth blazed with great bowls of daisies. Matty sent to San Francisco for six dozen wax candles of assorted sizes, and the church, when they all assembled for the early nuptial Mass, was gay in color, fragrant with bloom, and sweet with the odor of sanctity.

Bart did not go to confession. The rest of the family had dutifully visited Father Francis at the church during the late afternoon of the previous day. The boy pleaded his work had absorbed him and he had forgotten the hour.

Consequently he did not receive communion the next morning, but the omission was not conspicuous, as neither Gill nor Josh had arrived in time the night before to be confessed. Aunt Gertrude and her daughters, Ada and Dora, accompanied the two Carter brothers from San Francisco. Porter Farnsworth was unable to leave his business for so long, and Felix was away, camping with schoolmates near the Russian River. There was no message from Eva Ann or Tony, although Matty had sent an urgent letter begging them to be present.

Although her daughter's absence was keenly felt by Matty, she was largely consoled by the presence of Josh and Gill, and particularly by the appearance at the church of her brother-in-law, Stephen Carter, together with his fifteen-year-old Lottie and his twelve-year-old May. This had been due to the intervention of Father Francis. He had paid several visits to the Stephens' shabby home, had brought to his aunt the consolation of her faith, had administered the Sacraments and had had several earnest talks with his uncle. There was not much to be done for either of them, he reported; Stephen Carter's spirit seemed to be irreparably broken, and it was obvious his wife was not long for the world. Father Francis, however, had succeeded in healing the breach between Stephen and Philo, and now the attendance of the former with his two daughters at her son's wedding brought an added touch of felicity to Matty's already overflowing heart. She sent Bart after Stephen as soon as the ceremony was concluded, to urge him and his two girls to come to the large and sumptuous breakfast awaiting them all at Los Robles.

The happy radiance in his mother's face as she presided over this bounteous feast and looked beamingly at the many faces of her clan assembled about her, drew more than Bart's comment of admiration. She was like some magnificent Erda, ample, beneficent, gracious. Her greatest joy was in Father Francis, who sat beside her, and whose thin, white hand she now and then covered contentedly with her large, plushy, fat one.

There were many toasts and speeches, Gill making an excellent talk, Bart thought. The health of bride and groom was drunk in sweet, heady white wine, a barrel of which Philo had obtained from old Luigi Bacigalupi in San Geronimo. Frank Gardiner and Camilla were pledged as the next to wed; the company rose and rose and rose again to lift their glasses to Matty, to Philo, to the bride's sisters, to each of her cousins, to every member of the company. The frosted cake appeared, with tiny figures of a groom in a black coat and a bride in a gauze veil surmounting the sugary masterpiece. Happy, excited Jane cut and carefully sliced it so that everyone might have a neat square. Uncle Stephen, grown flushed and loquacious, confided to Philo in a voice which reached more than Bart's ears that he was very much of an old ass, and he hoped Philo would let bygones be bygones. Tilly had several hysterical crying spells and had to kiss Janey rapturously after each one.

And then, quite unexpectedly, the meal was over. Janey, who had unobtrusively left the table accompanied by Josephine and Peggy, reappeared smartly clad in a long tan tailormade and a stiff-brimmed straw hat, while Jack followed, carrying two brand-new suitcases. The old surrey was at the door. Bart hurried out to it and climbed to the driver's seat. In a moment, the entire company had swarmed out of the house, and from sheds, barns, and corrals, the cutter girls, the packers, the ranch-hands came running. Jack helped his wife into the back seat, got in beside her, the suitcases were piled in next to Bart, and amid showers of rice, a bombardment of old shoes, shouts and shrieks of farewell, Bart successfully guided the frightened team around the circle of lawn, out the main gateway, and through the streets of Carterville, where more hands fluttered from windows; men and boys crowded doorways to applaud and wave their hats, wishing the young couple the best of luck.

It was a long drive to Guadalupe over the dusty, bumpy road. Jack and Jane murmured together in the back seat, and their subdued tones frequently were punctuated with little happy laughs from the young bride. Bart could not keep his thoughts from them. He wondered what it must be like to be married, married to a girl like Jane? He speculated about the intimacies of the relationship. His wayward mind brought him a picture of them in bed together. The thought choked him! . . . . Jane and Jack! . . . . They would spend that night in a hotel room at Santa Cruz! They would undress in each other's presence! Day and night, for a week, they would be together, eat together, rise up and lie down together!

Mixed with all these disturbing images was the vision of a wistful brown face with a turned-up nose and dark eyes.

He waited until he saw the dusty lumbering bus start for Gilroy and stood, feeling forlorn and deserted, waving a last farewell to the two laughing faces which peered at him through the square window glass in the stage's back. Then he climbed once more into the surrey, let Dolly and Daisy have their heads and make their own pace towards home.

§ 7

There was one more day of festivity, Saturday evening marking the end of the family reunion. Camilla had arranged a supper of cold turkey, ham, and roast beef, and there was a pink melting mound of soft strawberry ice cream with cake, for dessert. Gill set the company in roars of laughter with tales of undergraduate exploits, Josh shocked and horrified them with descriptions of a dissecting room, while Aunt Gertrude bored them with a long-winded account of the prowess and achievements of her son Felix who had just graduated from the Lowell High School.

Mathilda did not appear. She remained upstairs, and Camilla reported she was "tired out." Uncle Philo gloomily presided in his accustomed place, silent, observant, black-browed. The rest kept up a clatter of talk and laughter, with Tilly alone blinking and sniffling, as she circled the table removing plates.

Bart realized he himself was tired. He went early to his room, lay down, still dressed, upon his narrow bed, and, with locked hands beneath his head, thought of his brother, the priest, of Josh and Gill, of his utter boredom and dissatisfaction with life, of running away, of jobs he might find and successfully fill in San Francisco, of some knowing person discovering his poetry, of its being proclaimed first rate, of its publication, of the clamor of editors and publishers, of national recognition, of his brothers and sisters, his sour old uncle, his mother, all of them, pointing to him at last with pride, boastfully claiming relationship!

He fell asleep, dressed as he was. Not once during his idle dreaming, did the thought of Pudgie Cook occur to him.

§ 8

But he had occasion to think of her in no uncertain fashion the following morning. Sometime during the night he had awakened, blunderingly undressed, and found his way to bed; he awoke fresh and in gay spirits, and, after a fine breakfast, went to work in an elated mood. He was whistling the lively "Mosquitoes' Parade" as he drove his nails briskly home, when a voice, close at hand, startled him.

"You're feeling pretty chipper this morning, Mr. Bart Carter."

Leaning across the high sill of the doorway were silhouetted the head and shoulders of a woman. The light was uncertain, but, as Bart gazed, he was conscious of a sharp revulsion. There was something unwholesome about her face; it was evil, leering, unfriendly.

"Feeling pretty chipper, hey?" the woman repeated, this time with an interrogating inflection. "Well, perhaps you won't be feeling so awfully smart when I'm done with you. Guess you don't know who I am? . . . . I'm Pudgie's sister; I'm Ossip."

She waited, letting him get the effect of this, smiling slyly the while, enjoying his discomfiture. Bart felt his heart thumping in his breast; he did not move; he dared hardly draw breath.

"What you going to do 'bout Pudgie, Mr. Carter?" asked Ossip ingratiatingly; "what you going to do 'bout her? She's going to have a baby. Guess you didn't know that. Well, she is, and you and I both know whose baby it is. Now, won't your ma and uncle be pleased when they hear about that? . . . . You ain't been near my sister for three days, and she's been crying her eyes out, and my mother's been abusing her and trying to find out what's the matter with her. But you and I know what's the matter with her, don't we, Mr. Carter? What you going to do 'bout it? I suppose you think you going to do nothing. Well, you got another think coming, Mr. Carter. You're going to marry my sister, and you're going to marry her right; more than that, you're going to marry her pretty quick. Don't think so? Oh, yes, you are, 'cause if you don't, I'm going straight to your ma and your uncle, and then I'm going to tell everybody I know. Your family will think a heap of you, won't they, when they find out you've taken advantage of a poor little cutter girl and made a fool out of her? . . . . Now, you listen to me, Mr. Carter—" the bantering tone ceased, the eyes steadied, the voice dropped to a lower key —"my father was a good man, he was the only decent man I ever knew, and he set a heap of store by Pudgie; I'm going to see she gets what's coming to her if I have to use one of his rusty old six-shooters. Now—" the suave accents returned—"you and I don't want any trouble like that. You do what's right and proper by Pudgie, and I'll love you like a brother. If you don't, watch out! . . . . And if I was you, Mr. Bart, I'd go over and see Pudgie to-night. The poor kid's all broke up; she can't work, she can't do nothing but just sit round and cry. . . . . I'll tell her you're coming."

She was gone—the awful face and the awful voice—and it was as if a storm had passed. Despite the racket outside, silence seemed to fill the workshop. Bart sat stricken, his hammer in one hand, a piece of board in the other. He felt as if he had been hit a terrific blow. After a long while, he rose and went to stand at the sashless window in the wall opposite the door. It gave upon the slope of hill where the sliced apricots lay exposed to the sun. He gazed at the bright phalanx of orange-colored trays, he gazed at the crown of grapevines that skirted the brow of the hill, he gazed at the cloudless expanse of sky beyond, and at a lone buzzard wheeling and drifting against the blue background. He saw nothing. A whisper broke from him on a breath of agony: "Oh—oh—oh!" and he gently thumped his forehead with the heel of a palm.

Presently he faced about, drew a deep inhalation, flung out his hands, and said aloud to the empty shop:

"Well, you're *in* for it, you damned *fool!*"

Back to his box-making. He felt suddenly eager to occupy himself; he might be able to think more clearly.

§ 9

Marry Pudgie? Very well. But *on* what? With what? If she wanted him to, he'd marry her, and then what? Run away? That would be the only course, but it would take money, and he had none. Under no circumstances must his mother or his uncle know about the matter. The very thought closed his throat. He was ready to marry a dozen Pudgies first. Besides, there were Camilla and Tilly, Peggy, and all the rest —Jack and Jane, so soon to return! It was unthinkable he should ever stand before them self-confessed, before Jane in particular, to whom he had vociferously declaimed his love and devotion! How traitorous he had been to that self-same love! Ah, no—no, he couldn't face her. Nobody must know until after he'd gone. Flight was the only way. He would marry Pudgie and go away with her. In San Francisco they would be hard to trace. He would find something to do. As she had said, people did not starve . . . .

§ 10

Once he had definitely reached this conclusion, equanimity and resignation came to him. Eva Ann and Tony had paved the way; he and Pudgie would follow their example. For years he had been longing to escape; now the decision was forced upon him. Go he must, and he would leave without regret.

That night, it was he who was first at the meeting place beside the wild lilacs. He did not have long to wait. Pudgie came in hesitation, but a cry, half terror, half joy, broke from her as he caught her to him.

Tendernesses, endearments, loving murmurs poured from the two. They held each other by the arms, and each searched the other's face. They sank down among the ferns and cuddled together, holding tightly. So much they had to say to one another!

Pudgie, first of all, must make him positively understand that she had never betrayed their secret to a soul. Ossip had just guessed. Pudgie hadn't a notion how she'd found out. Her sister had come to her in the tent Saturday night; they usually all gathered round the camp fire on that night, but Pudgie had been feeling too utterly miserable. Ossip had come in to hold the lantern close to her face and saw she'd been crying. She *had* been a little, because she'd thought Bart didn't love her any more, and she hadn't known how she was ever going to face her mother when she found out. Ossip had asked her right away about Bart, and she, Pudgie, couldn't help it; she'd just burst out crying. Then Ossip had asked her when she'd come round last, and Pudgie had had to tell her that was the trouble . . . .

Bart's thoughts were not of what she was saying. He sat watching her, studying her small animated face, working, puckering, wrinkling. Cute she was—no denying that—cute, affectionate, and loving, but were these the only qualities his wife was to possess—that mysterious, beautiful, and incomparable woman of whom he had dreamed since boyhood, who was to awaken in him a great love, inspire him to poetical flights rivaling the "Sonnets from the Portuguese"? Was his married fate to be nothing more alluring, stimulating nor desirable than Pudgie Cook? Was this the woman who was to be his companion through life, the one to travel the years with him, be his solace and his comrade when his hair became thin and gray, and he grew bent and uncertain of step? Must he for the rest of his days face that turned-up nose, those close-set eyes?

He drew breath deeply; his heart sank beneath a weight.

But with talk of plans for the future, the load lightened. He was surprised by her confidence, her courage.

"I'd just as soon go to 'Frisco," she told him, "only I thought we'd get along in the country better. I can always cut 'cots and make two dollars a day, and you know how to work on a ranch. But the city'll suit me all right. Wages there are higher for one thing, and I won't be able to work after a while. Your brothers surely will find something for you to do, and the one that's studying to be a doctor can help me when the baby comes. We can only have a room at first, Bart darling. I'll cook you the nicest meals you ever ate in your life, you see if I don't. If you get a job that will pay two dollars a day, we can live easy!"

"I know, Pudgie, but what about doctors' bills if one of us gets sick, and how about clothes——"

"Neither of us is going to get sick, and I can make my own clothes—I always have—and besides, I won't need clothes while the baby's coming. . . . . Oh, Bart, it just makes me so happy I could nearly die to think of you and me, husband and wife, with a teeney-weeney home all to ourselves and a baby already on the way . . . ."

"But, gee, Pudg', listen here: it's going to cost a lot to get out of here; there're bus and railroad fares, and we've got to have something to live on while we look round——"

"Scarey-boots! How much do you think we'll need? Ten dollars will take us to the city, and I've got twenty. How much have you?"

He was ashamed to tell her how little. There rose in him a sudden revulsion to the whole plot. He did not want to marry anyone, certainly not Pudgie Cook! He did not want to involve himself in trouble and responsibility. He knew much more about life than she did; he oughtn't to let himself listen to her. To run away to 'Frisco and be married there was all very well, but how were they going to live when they got there? Jobs didn't grow on trees; they weren't to be had for the asking! And they'd have a baby on their hands within a few months! He didn't know much about babies, but he was certain they cost a great deal. Fear packed his soul; the girl's confidence quickened his apprehensiveness.

"And we mustn't tell a single living soul, Bart darling. Ma mustn't suspect a thing. Oh, she'd raise the devil, if she did! She's something *terrible* when she gets started. I think I'd rather die than let her have an inkling we're going to elope. I won't even tell Ossip. And you mustn't tell *anybody!* Promise me, Bart darling. You won't tell a soul, will you? They'd take you away from me—I know they would—and I'd just die, that's all there would be to it! I just couldn't live without you, dear.

I'd kill myself! I would! . . . . Oh, when can we go, Bart darling? To-morrow? Why not to-morrow? I haven't worked a lick since Saturday, and I've got nothing coming, so there's no sense in my waiting. Let's go to-morrow, dearest. . . . . I'll tell you what we'll do: we'll wait until Bacigalupi's truck comes along. I know Joe Tasheira, who drives for him, and we'll make Joe give us a lift into 'Lupe. We can catch the two o'clock bus to Gilroy, be in 'Frisco to-morrow night, and get married Wednesday morning! Oh, Bart darling, let's do it! Won't it be simply wonderful? They can do whatever they want then; nobody can take you from me after that!"

She flung her arms about him in an ecstasy of joy, straining him to her, pulling his head down to her breast, holding it close, fondling it, pressing her cheek tenderly against his hair.

After a little, he straightened himself, smoothed his rumpled mop, and let his eyes drift upwards to the starlit heavens overhead.

"Mother of God," he whispered in his heart, "I'm in a dreadful mess!"

His thoughts again carried him to Father Francis . . . . There was the man who could and would befriend him now, who could and would help him. Where was he to be found? Gone on a three months' mission, traveling from place to place! Bart recalled he had asked his mail to be forwarded in care of the Bishop.

"How about it, Bart darling? Shall we make the big sneak to-morrow?"

"To-morrow?" he repeated apathetically.

"Yes, to-morrow."

"I don't know about to-morrow, Pudgie."

"Why not?"

"A lot of reasons."

"Name one."

"Oh, Pudgie, you don't understand."

"I do. I understand perfectly. You haven't enough gumption, that's all."

"Oh, shucks, Pudg', don't talk that way; it isn't a question of gumption. I don't see the necessity for all the rush."

"Well, I do. The quicker I get out of here, the better. I'm terrified Ma will be on to me. Once she begins to suspect there's something wrong, she'll raise the very devil until she finds out who the man is."

Her frankness, the cheapness of her speech, sickened him.

"I couldn't get away to-morrow in any case," he said stiffly.

"I'd like to know the reason. If I'm going to be your wife, I've a right to know."

"For one thing,"—his tone was plainly irritable—"I haven't the money."

"Well, I have."

"I'm not going to run away on your money, and I'm not going to 'Frisco to marry you or anybody without a stake of some kind. It would be just damn foolishness."

"Well, where you going to get it?"

Ah, yes, indeed, where was he going to get it? Frank? Frank might lend him a few dollars, but Frank would do his best to dissuade him from his intent, and he might—most probably would—communicate with Camilla.

"If you don't," said Pudgie, with a significant nod, "you know what Ossip said she'd do!"

So she and Ossip had talked it all over between them! And Ossip had said that if Bart balked she'd threaten him with exposure, would go to his family and tell on him! It had been a neat little conspiracy after all!

His head sank abjectly into his hands, and desolation filled his soul.

Pudgie realized she had said the wrong thing. He sat with his face buried, and she, apart, watching him. Then, with a cry, her arms went about him again, and she was kissing his hair, his ear, his neck, imploring his forgiveness, protesting she had not meant what he thought she did, swearing she loved him with all her heart and soul, brain and body . . . .

Perhaps she did, perhaps the two of them might make a go of it, but he knew in his heart, now, that he no longer loved her, that whatever emotion she had awakened in him, it was not love. He realized it clearly at last, and realized with equal clarity that he was caught in a trap from which there was no escape. Marry her he must, and go with her to the city to make the best of a bad bargain. But money he had to have, fifty dollars at least, for food and a place to live until he had time to look about and find something to do. He would not move otherwise.

"I'll have to see what I can do," he said on a long breath, finding his feet. "It's out of the question for me to get away to-morrow, but perhaps in a day or so; maybe by the end of the week . . . .

"Tell your sister she needn't worry. I'm going to go through with it; I'll marry you all right. Better advise her to use some of her own methods and land a husband for herself."

He turned away then, striding off into the darkness, kicking a path through the tangled tarweed and dry grasses. He did not look back to see what Pudgie did, nor listen to hear whether or not she was crying.

§ 11

"I'm leaving here. I'm going away in a few days. I'll never see the place any more; I'll never see the orchards in bloom, nor the alfalfa fields in spring, nor the hayricks, nor the barns, nor the old house. I'll never ride Clown again."

It was Friday. Bart had climbed the hill behind the carpenter shop, had skirted the vivid blanket of flaming fruit trays, and stood on the crest of the rise among the dusty vines. The panorama of Los Robles stretched below him; at the foot of the hill ran the county road, and on its other side lay his uncle Stephen's property. Beyond that were the orderly orchards, yellow hayfields, and barns of other ranches. To his right, over the tops of the trees at the rear of the Carter homestead, he could plainly discern the roofs of Carterville, the modest spire of the Catholic church, and the cornice of the new brick bank building.

This was his native heath, he thought; here he had been bred and raised; this was his home, his homeland, the only one he had ever known.

He had read a book once, *A Hazard of New Fortunes*. That was what he was facing now: a hazard of new fortunes. He and Pudgie were going to be married and begin a new life amid new surroundings! . . . . Again that sickening fear. Fear? Yes, fear. He did not want to go ahead with this thing—he did not want his life to be complicated by a wife and baby! Here was home, here was security, here people loved him and would take care of him if anything happened to him! Out there in the city, cruel and cold—careless of lives and of souls—who would give him a thought?

Ossip's leering face rose before him

"What you going to do 'bout Pudgie, Mr. Carter? Guess you and I know what's the matter with her, don't we? Won't your ma and uncle be pleased when they hear about that? . . . ."

No—no, never—*never* that! Marry and run rather than that!

"I must keep what she said always in mind," he told himself. "I can't turn back; I must go through with it. We must leave here at once—to-day, to-morrow, as soon as possible. . . . . But where the devil can I get the money?"

And as though the Devil seemed to hear his question and to set about accommodating him, when Bart came in for noonday dinner, he learned his uncle had been gored on the range that morning. A steer had pinioned horse and rider into a fence corner, had ripped his horn into the calf of Philo's leg. His uncle would ride no more for several days. Medcraft had come and gone, pronouncing the injury not to be serious. Philo wished to see Bart as soon as he had finished dinner.

Bart found him in his room, sitting up, his bandaged leg in another chair.

"You'll have to go to the bank this afternoon and draw the pay roll," said Philo; "Jack isn't here, and there's nobody else to send. My check's lying there on the table; penciled on its back, you'll see how I want the money. Cummings understands. See here—" he indicated the jottings on the reverse side of the check which Bart handed him—"forty nickels, twenty-five dimes, eighteen quarters, ten four-bit pieces, twenty-four dollars, and so on. You have Cummings count it out for you, and you check him as he does it. Then you take the money over to the office and lock it up in the safe. The door's open; all you have to do is turn the handle, but you spin the knob after you put the money inside. It amounts to an even three hundred and ninety-three. I'll get over there somehow to-morrow and pay out the money myself; you'll have to help me, I reckon. . . . . This is tough luck with Jack away. I 'phoned a wire into Guadalupe telling him to come home; he ought to be here to-morrow night."

§ 12

There was the way, ready to hand, as if the Devil indeed, seeing his plight, had decided to show it to him. With mind benumbed, his thoughts at a standstill, Bart slung the leather money sack over his shoulder, saddled Clown—for the last time, perhaps—rode the short distance to Carterville, stood at the teller's window, watched the cashier assemble the money, each roll neatly wrapped in brown paper, and watched him stack the various denominations together, counting out the odd coins two at a time with clever flips of two fingers. Then, with his mind still in a daze, he put the money into the leather pouch, hefting the weighty cylinder of golden twenties, and rode home. Outside his uncle's office, he hitched Clown to an iron leg of the water tank, went in, closed the door, put the money on the desk, and sat down to think.

For a long time he sat there, his eyes fixed on the paper-wrapped rolls and loose silver. He had thought he would come to a decision, then, make up his mind exactly what he should do. But he could not concentrate, thoughts eluding him; he sat there in a stupor, staring at the money as if hypnotized.

After ten, fifteen, twenty minutes—it might have been longer—he rose, drew a deep breath as if what he was about to do was inevitable, picked up the heavy roll of twenties, dropped it into his overalls, wrote "I. O. U.—$200." on a slip of paper, signed "Bart," put it with the rest of the money within the safe, shut the door, and turned the knob.

With the click of the falling tumblers, his alertness returned. He gazed with widening eyes a moment at the closed door.

Immediately his thoughts began to race. It was three o'clock. What he had to do must be done at once; to-morrow would be too late. Philo might be opening the safe at any hour. Pudgie and himself must go that very night. The last bus from Guadalupe to Gilroy left at four. There was none after that. Very well, he and Pudgie would drive the distance; he would take the old buggy and hitch up Clown. Clown would not like it, but that could not be helped. It might take them six or seven hours, but they'd be in Gilroy by the morning, able to catch an early train for the city. He'd leave Clown and the buggy at Tarleton's Stable and ask Tarleton to tell Frank about the rig after the train pulled out.

Gently he closed the office door, pulling it hard after him until the catch definitely clicked; then he rode Clown to the barn, shook down some hay from the loft, gave him a half-nosebag full of oats, and hurried off in quest of Pudgie.

BOOK III

1910

CHAPTER I

§ 1

THE prunes were beginning to fall. Bart remembered, as a boy, their dropping tolled for him the end of summer and the beginning of what Jane used to call the "hazy-dazy" autumn. From the orchard beyond the line of laurels, pickers were at work, crawling about beneath the trees on their hands and knees; occasionally he could hear the rubadub sound of the fruit as it was dumped from baskets and buckets into the empty boxes.

A gracious, warm afternoon's peace lay upon Los Robles. Jane had achieved wonders with the garden. The weedy old lawn had long ago been spaded up, rolled, and resown; it lay, a gently undulating green, stretching from the, now, macadamized driveway before the house to the rampart of firs and laurels at its further end. Many of the trees which Aunt Mathilda had been at such pains to set out, Jane had ruthlessly cut down, the malevolent monkey tree among them. When one of the mammoth oaks on the north side of the house died, the idea of what more light and sunshine would do for the place had come to Jane, she explained to Bart. It was then she had gone about and unsparingly trimmed back thick foliage, chopped down overhanging vines, and sawed off limbs. The mattress vine, which once covered an end of the veranda, had been torn away at that time, a honeysuckle had replaced it, and now banksia roses clambered to the porch eaves and spread themselves in a glory over the roof. Around the edges of the wide circle of lawn, a five-foot flower bed extended, and here tall hollyhocks, foxgloves, and blue delphiniums made a colorful background for lesser-sized blooms.

Jane believed in vivid colorings and mass profusion rather than in formal garden effects. In the matter of shade and shadow alone did she wield uncompromising shears.

"Why, when Aunt Matty was alive," she frequently exclaimed, "the place smelled actually dank at times!"

It was far pleasanter so, Bart was thinking on this particular late August afternoon as he eased himself in his wicker chair and with conscious effort recrossed his feet upon the low railing that bulwarked the porch. The old place was like a new place since Jack and Jane had had it to themselves. It was quieter now, better ordered, better managed. There was none of the higglety-pigglety turmoil, the racket and confusion that had characterized it in his mother's day.

Quiet and sunshiny tranquillity prevailed. Bees zummed in the honeysuckle, humming birds poised before the banksia roses and darted away to the flower beds, a butterfly alighted upon a royal zinnia, gently opening and closing its wings in luxurious contentment. Bart, idly watching the slowly waving pinions, decided he felt much the same way. It had been by far his best day since the long, hot, dusty one in June when Doctor J. Daniel Carter—no longer to be affectionately known as Josh—had driven him all the way from the city, and, with Jane and Peggy standing by, had helped him out of the car, to pilot him gently into the house, up the familiar sharp-angled stairway, into Camilla's and Tilly's old room, much changed now with gay wall paper and pink cross-barred muslin.

"You're all very good to me," Bart had said then, as tears of gratitude and physical weakness filled his eyes.

He felt the prick of them even now as he recalled that exhausting day, and the kindness everyone had shown him. It had been hard for him to believe they really cared, that they were genuinely anxious to help him regain his health and strength.

"Now, it's up to you, old boy," Doctor Dan had said to him before departing. "Quiet, lots of sunshine, above all, rest. No physical exertion of any kind; Medcraft will look after you. I'll stop and have a talk with him on my way back. You're still young—not twenty-nine—and you've inherited a sound body and a sound mind. Give 'em a chance, and you'll get well."

Well, he had "given 'em a chance," and he was getting well, slowly but definitely. It would hardly have been possible to do otherwise, he thought, in such an atmosphere of loving kindness and goodness. Perhaps it was the goodness, more than any other factor, which had contributed most to his recovery, that had made him want to begin over again. . . . . Yes, he wanted to do that very much, for their sakes—Dan's, Father Francis', Jack's, Jane's and Peggy's—as well as for his own.

He lifted his hand, a hand thin, emaciated, and white. He fisted it. Still the hand of a sick man, but there was strength in it. From that selfsame chair a week ago, he had watched one of the men mowing the lawn, back and forth, back and forth, back and forth; it had tired him so much, just looking on, he had been obliged to go indoors. But to-day he had been sitting on the porch, most of the afternoon, reading *The Ballad of Reading Gaol,* idling, dozing at odd moments, enjoying the rumbling sound of the prunes being dumped into wooden boxes, even calling a comment now and then to Peggy where she sat in the covered swing-couch halfway down the lawn beside the hydrangea beds.

He must begin to write again, he decided. It was the only way in which he might ever reëstablish himself. The day that Wat Fogarty had kicked him out of the *Call* office, he had sworn he would never hold pen again. But now he knew he would—he must. He saw in writing his predestined pursuit. Success or failure did not matter. He would always write—try to, at any rate.

He ruminated upon the various plots he had mentally tucked away during his newspaper days. One by one he discarded all of them. He had long since given up poetry. His thoughts turned, as they so often did, to the tales his father, old Captain Dan, had loved to tell of the quicksilver mine days at Almaden. Those mines were deserted now, Bart understood; a whole village of empty cabins, a school, a church, a General

Store, a community which had once throbbed with life—with hope and fear, love and death—now no more. Only the skeletons of its habitations remained. As soon as he was strong enough, he would go there and look about; it would be a unique atmosphere for a yarn even now, and he might be able to conjure up a picture of the days of twenty, thirty, forty years ago, when five thousand souls peopled its streets, grubbed and sweated in its deep-sunk shafts.

Mathilda Crane, the lovely daughter of the Company's storekeeper, who had lived regally at the hacienda till she had eloped with her swaggering young Southern lover . . . .

He thought of his father and mother coming to Los Robles, determined to make their home in the wild, trackless land with its wooded, winding creek, its scrub trees, its hillsides covered sparsely with chaparral and bush. He thought of them selecting the site for the home beside the three oaks, choosing its name, turning the first shovelful. No mean visionaries had been Captain Dan Carter and his wife!

Jack had persuaded his mother to sell the Rincón de Romas ranch after the violent end of Uncle Philo, savagely kicked to death by his favorite horse. The details of the tragedy had been particularly grewsome, but in them, Bart decided, he saw no small measure of poetic justice.

What changes had come to his people and his home in the ten years he had been away, the ten years since he had eloped with Pudgie Cook—Pudgie, so loving, ardent, and hopeful!

That summer, Aunt Lizzie had died, the first to go, and the Stephen Carter place had been taken over by the Guadalupe National Bank, while Uncle Stephen, with Lottie and May, had gone to live in Salinas, where Bart was told the girls still were, although their father had soon followed his wife to the grave. No one knew what had happened to the boys.

The management of Los Robles had descended upon Jack's shoulders, and he at once started changes long advocated. One of these had been the ending of the cattle business, which had never made money since his father's day. The herd was sold, the barren Rincón de Romas property likewise, and Guadalupe Meadows staked out to prunes and apricots. At Los Robles, the old corrals had gone, the alfalfa and hayfields had been plowed up and this new acreage added to the old, and all consecrated to fruit. It had cost money, a great deal of it; for the first time in its history, the Carter property had carried a mortgage, but Jack, encouraged by Jane, had been confident; the years to come would bring them a royal return.

In the midst of these changes, Mathilda, heavy and increasingly inactive, had had a stroke. For almost a year, she had lingered in a death-in-life state, until a third seizure had mercifully carried her off. Her death had been the signal for a general scattering of the family. Jack proceeded to buy out his brothers' and sisters' interests in the old homestead by adding a second mortgage to Los Robles. Bart, who could not be located at this time, still owned a ninth interest, worth about two thousand dollars, his brother informed him. Camilla promptly married Frank Gardiner and went with him to open their long-dreamed-of bookshop, not in San Francisco, but in Los Angeles. Josephine was the next to depart. She enrolled in the nurses' training school of Cooper's Medical College, but her course was interrupted by the San Francisco earthquake. She then volunteered as a refugee worker, and had ever since been involved in social service of one kind or another. Jane received frequent letters from her. After a year or so of settlement work in the city's slums, Jo had thrown herself into active campaigning for woman suffrage—on one occasion addressing the State Legislature at Sacramento. Next she registered as a student at the University of California and wrote she planned to go to Philadelphia within a year to study medicine.

During the days of suffering and need, following the San Francisco catastrophe of 1906, Trudie joined Josephine in the city. After she had done what she could for the sick and destitute quartered in the parks and public squares, she had surprised everyone by returning to the ranch with a husband, a young bank clerk—one Jerome McGillicuddy—and after a few days at home, went back to the city, set herself up in a flat, and at the end of her first married year, gave birth to two fine, healthy twin boys.

"They run in families, you know," Jane said to Bart, on imparting this information.

"You may have a pair yourself," he told her, but Jane shook her yellow head, and a faint frown marked her brow.

But the surprise of all surprises happened just before Bart's return. Tilly, giggling, simpering, kittenish Tilly, who one and all had taken for granted was destined to be an old maid, acquired a husband of her own, and a good one: Ulrich Wyss, a stolid Swiss, who conducted Guadalupe's most flourishing butcher business. With his wife's money, he bought out his partner and enlarged his shop. He and Tilly were for the present occupying two rooms at Miller's Hotel, but were building a home on the outskirts of the town. Wyss seemed well satisfied with his bargain, and Tilly lived in a seventh heaven of delight. That her husband was a rigid Lutheran and hated all things Catholic gave her small concern. Without hesitation she had consented to a Lutheran ritual of marriage, and Peggy and Jane were much exercised over the danger of her embracing that faith altogether. Peggy made it a matter for prayer and wrote regularly about it to Father Francis.

The brother priest was now attached to the Cathedral in San Francisco; his duties rarely permitted him to come to Los Robles, and his letters were even more infrequent than his visits. Bart, while convalescing at Dan's home, had seen him every other day. It was generally understood that the Archbishop thought highly of his coadjutor, and Bart had often heard, during his brief newspaper days, that Father Carter played a strong hand in the councils of the city supervisors.

Dan—Doctor J. Daniel, and Gill—Henry Aloysius, were both married. Bart had come to know Mrs. Dan fairly well while he was an invalid in her house. Louise was a round, soft, lovely creature, infatuated with her husband, and devoted to him and her home. There was something mysteriously wrong with Louise, however. Bart was unable to fathom it and used to wonder what was the matter. She acted queerly at times, carefully considering what she did and where she went. She and the doctor had been married just after the earthquake, and Dan, it was generally predicted, was destined to become one of the big physicians of the Pacific Coast.

Of Gill's wife, little was known to Jane and Peggy, who were the purveyors of all this family news. Gill had gone to New York after graduation, had connected himself with some sort of a trade journal publishing business, and within a year, had married his employer's daughter, a Vassar girl, whom Jane and Peggy had been led to believe was a great beauty and very popular; Gill and his wife were now living in Port Washington on Long Island, where they had bought a home. Gill never wrote. When his mother died, he had telegraphed, and at the time of the San Francisco earthquake, he had sent Dan a hundred dollars with a slip of paper pinned to the money order, telling his brother to use it as he saw fit.

There remained Eva Ann. Bart had asked about her first, the morning after his arrival, when Peggy, who had come to his room to carry away the breakfast tray, paused, his tray balanced on the footboard of his bed, to chat for a moment. The last time she and Jane had seen Eva Ann was at his mother's funeral. She had appeared then, a thin, meek, frightened-looking woman, in a funny antiquated jet bonnet and a long black cloak. Someone had driven her over from Guadalupe as she had not let anybody know she was coming, and she had unobtrusively found her way into church, seating herself inconspicuously in one of the back pews. No one would ever have known she was there, if Tilly had not happened to recognize her. They had made her come to the house with them after the Mass, had been as affectionate and warm as they knew how, urging her to stay for a while, but Eva Ann had said firmly she must go back. The whole time, she remained shy, uncommunicative, aloof. She told them she had five children, that she and Tony had sold their ranch in the Santa Cruz hills and were living in San José where Tony was in the milk business.

"Delivering it, I'm afraid," Peggy observed in her earnest, breathless way. "There was no piercing her shell, somehow, because, although we all tried our level best, she wouldn't say a word. Jack saw her when he went up to make arrangements for buying her interest in Los Robles, and he said she was living in a shack of a house with a swarm of children crawling over her and everything, and she didn't seem to mind a bit, and goodness knows what they did with the money, but I reckon Tony squandered it, for I don't think he amounts to much, at least Jo says so, and you should hear her lay him out! They've had two more babies since then, and that makes seven. Poor old Eva Ann; it seems awfully hard on her, doesn't it?"

Bart was surprised at the feeling his cousin displayed. Peggy was still a child, but had developed into a very lovely one. There was something exceedingly engaging about her soft contours, her young, rounded breasts, the unaffected way she wore her hair in braids about her head, the creamy white skin of her face with a brown shadow of freckles across the bridge of her nose. She was probably twenty-one or -two, but she seemed younger. Purity enveloped her, a quality that was beautifully virginal.

§ 2

His mind fixed itself upon her now, as he saw her rise from the swing couch and come with a light, buoyant step toward him across the lawn, her full dotted Swiss dress and her flopping flowered straw hat making a delightful note against the green background. She would be the next to marry, he decided—some yokel in the neighborhood, and have a flock of children like Eva Ann's. It seemed a pity. The world he had come to know so bitterly was hard and cruel and destroying to such innocence and purity.

He thought of her in comparison with Jane, who, with Jack, had firmly set her mind towards security and comfort. Jane had grown practical and capable. Her husband, her small sister, her home and her garden made up the sum of her interests in life, and she managed these competently and kept them in good order. Jane was remarkable, Bart considered. She made a wonderful wife for his brother. How different his own life would have been, he thought, had she responded to his boyish passion and married him instead! All that old feeling was dead now. His admiration and affection for her were unmixed with any more tender emotion. Jane, in her robust vitality, in her trim, belted, Dutch-necked aprons, bustling, directing, active, rather appalled him. Kind she was, and considerate, forestalling every thought and wish, not only for himself, the invalid, but for everybody connected with her household. Jane was a manager. She managed her servants, she managed her sister, she managed her husband, and, through him, Los Robles.

The house itself, and almost to a degree the garden, absorbed her attention, and both admirably showed the care lavished upon them. The ramshackle building, which Bart remembered as his home, was now hardly recognizable. It had been entirely replastered within. Green shutters had been added to the windows, giving a Colonial aspect to the place. The hideous, ungainly upholstered sofa and chairs in what had once been the stiffly appointed parlor, the bulky walnut set in Captain Dan's and Mathilda's bedroom, the square, rickety table and cumbersome cupboard in the dining room had all gradually disappeared and been replaced by modern, more suitable furniture. Jane loved her home; she loved fussing over it, she loved counting her linen, making new curtains and embroidering new towels for any one of the several guest rooms. She loved arranging flowers in vases and trying different effects; she even enjoyed picking up the stray petals that fell to the floor during these experiments. She was tirelessly busy, moving energetically about, broad of hip, broad of chest, broad of shoulder, and broad of heart.

She dominated her younger sister as she dominated everybody else, but there was nothing assertively unpleasant about her. Jane was disarmingly generous. She was happiest in doing a kindly act, and her greatest joy was achieved by some deed of thoughtfulness coming as a delightful surprise to the person for whom it was intended. She showered kindnesses upon Peggy.

Affluence was still a long way off from herself and her husband. Los Robles was saddled with two mortgages, which year by year they strove to reduce. Improvements had cost a great deal, yet Jane was prodigal in embellishing her home and in making with her own capable hands the prettiest of frocks for her adored younger sister, who was always fragrantly and daintily dressed; she was much like Jane's garden.

The young girl now sank easily and gracefully to the veranda steps and turned wide, brown, serious eyes to meet Bart's smiling ones.

"Well, how goes it?" she asked brightly.

"Oh, very nicely, thank you; I've been quite comfortable this afternoon."

"You look lots better."

"I am."

"Seems to me I see improvement in your face every day, and you don't grow tired so easily. You know all those gillyflowers down there at the lower end of the lawn?" she abruptly branched off to say with characteristic irrelevancy; "they ought to come out, every one of them, because, in the first place, it's much too hot for them there, and in the second . . . ."

She was launched on one of her long animated sentences, which Bart made no particular effort to follow. He watched her pleasantly.

"I think the hydrangeas ought to be moved too, or something done about them," she finished with almost equal unrelatedness.

He made an inconsequential observation, which set her off again with a tale about a puppy that had wandered in from the road and which she would dearly have loved to keep but didn't dare to, on account of Jane. When she paused, he sat without remark, contentedly contemplating the pleasing vista before him, conscious that the sound of her agreeable voice still hung in the air.

"A nice child," he thought.

Twisting his head the better to see, he read the name of the book she carried: *Quentin Durward.*

"Scott, hey?"

"Yes, I read him because I ought to, but he never wrote a book I like so well as *Scottish Chiefs,* and I loved *Anne* and *The Heir of Redclyffe* and *Ramona,* these are my favorites."

He smiled at the pauseless way in which she spoke.

"What modern writers have you read and do you like? *Janice Meredith?*"

"Oh, yes, I loved that, and I loved *When Knighthood Was in Flower* and *Graustark* and *The Helmet of Navarre*——"

"You've read a lot. How about *The Virginian?*"

"No-o, but I've read *A Gentleman from Indiana* and *Mr. Potter of Texas.*"

Bart's laugh rang out.

"Wister's book happens to be about a man from an entirely different state."

She looked rebuffed, but he hastened to reassure her.

"I've been sitting here," he went on after a moment, "trying to cook up a story myself."

"You mean?"

"Oh, trying to invent a plot, something that will make a good short story, or a good *long* short story, a novelette, maybe. I'd like to see if I could sell it to a magazine back East. I believe I could."

She stared at him round eyed, and the look brought a fresh smile to his lips.

"And what's wrong with that?" he demanded

"Oh, nothing," she said hastily; "I think it's simply marvelous, that's all."

"What?"

"To write a book."

"Well, it's hard work. . . . . I didn't know you were interested."

"Oh, well—ll . . . ." She made a little deprecating gesture. "I am; I reckon everybody is. I imagine it must be wonderful to be a writer."

"I imagine it must be," he repeated.

"I'd like to be one myself," he explained, answering her questioning glance.

"But you are, aren't you?" You *were.*"

"I was a bum reporter, if that's what you mean."

An ugly memory intruded, but he did not alter his expression.

"I must get busy," he said decisively; "this is an ideal place to write."

"You oughtn't to do anything to tire yourself."

"I won't."

Her ensuing silence drew his glance. She was gazing off across the still garden, and in her caught underlip and faraway look, he thought he detected sadness.

There was a diversion. A hideous banging and bumping began. Hilda, the maid, was putting a leaf into the dining table, preparatory to setting it for supper.

"She always makes such an unnecessary racket," Peggy said, frowning and turning her head in that direction. "She makes Janey wild."

"Let it make her wild," Bart suggested.

Peg's frown deepened, and she cast him a quick, shocked glance.

"Oh, but Bart, when it isn't necessary? I'll have to go and straighten her out."

"Who? Jane?" he teased.

She made a mouth at him and rose to her feet.

"Ah, don't go," he begged.

"I must. Jane will be furious. I have a hundred things to do."

"A hundred?"

"Well, a lot—or perhaps a distinguished writer would say 'a great many.' " She dropped him a curtsey.

"You muggins!" he laughed.

She blew him a kiss and went indoors.

Bart settled himself in his chair, idly opened his book, idly closed it. The shadows had now begun to lengthen, the hush of a dying afternoon lay upon the garden, the noise of the tumbling prunes in the fruit boxes had ceased, the feathered heads of the gay-colored phlox nodded in the last of the golden sunshine. Only the rumble of a home-going motor car along the public highway and the intermittent tap-tap of an indifferent woodpecker broke the stillness. Even the frogs and the crickets were silent. A mother quail, followed by her brood, ventured upon the lawn from a near-by flower-bed, commencing diligently to look for insects, and in and about the base of the zinnia stalks, a cottontail frisked with calm assurance.

Bart's eyes slowly closed.

CHAPTER II

§ 1

HIS thoughts, as he lay with his head against the back of the wicker chair, were none too pleasant, despite the enchantment of the hour.

Poignantly there returned to him the memory of the night when he had fled his people and his home, the night when, with a wildly beating heart, a sense of perilous adventure, fear of pursuit, he had driven Pudgie Cook, mile after mile, through the hot summer night to Gilroy. Towards four o'clock she had fallen asleep, her brown head against his shoulder, her cheap chip straw hat clasped in her lap. He remembered his feeling of proprietorship as he bought her an early breakfast at Speegle's Grill, two tickets to the city, and had helped her board the train, stowing her bulky Gladstone bag and his straw valise behind their plush-covered seat. It had been his turn to drowse, and he recalled with what a start of alarm a shrill whistle of the engine jerked him back to consciousness and to a full appreciation of what he had done and was doing. For the first time, it came over him that his mother, Camilla, Jane, Trudie, all of them, would hear of his theft and flight only with pain and sorrow. He sensed the smug, I-told-you-so attitude of Uncle Philo! He realized, too, with a wave of sickness, his act was irrevocable; he could never go back. He was a thief, a liar, and a coward; he was running away with a common little cutter girl whom he had seduced!

How young he had been, how ignorant, how foolish! Pudgie Cook and himself, toting their heavy luggage along Third Street in San Francisco, afraid to board a trolley car, not knowing whither they were bound, looking for a cheap hotel!

O night of wakefulness! O night of penitence and remorse!

There rose before him the vision of the bare, ugly hotel room into which they had been ushered by the shuffling darkey in a frayed and spotted braided coat. He saw again the lumpy double bed with its darned and dingy spread, the limp lace curtains, the washbasin that showed discolored streaks where the drip fell from tarnished faucets, the varnished yellow dresser, the square table with its stiffly-starched scarf, the ribbed white porcelain match safe in its center, the black cloth-bound Bible! All night long, mixed with his graver fears, had been the additional one that from this cheerless refuge he and Pudgie might summarily be ejected should their unholy relationship be discovered!

At an early hour the next day they were married. A license first at the City Hall, and following the suggestion of the affable clerk at the Bureau, they had stepped across the corridor to Judge Lockhardt's "chambers". There the Judge had removed his cigar, put on his spectacles, heaved himself up from his swivel chair, read a few hurried sentences, asked half a dozen questions, taken their signatures to an unofficial looking document, added his own, congratulated the bride, wished the groom luck, pocketed Bart's gold piece, and nodded good-day. In less than ten minutes, they were out in the corridor again, staring at each other in blank confusion, trying to realize they were now man and wife.

Bart, at twenty-nine, might shudder now in chagrin at the mistakes of nineteen. He felt pity, too—so crassly stupid, callow, blundering he had been. Pursuing and harrowing him all those first few weeks and months had been the fear of arrest. Thief that he was! Philo's animosity which had smoldered through the years! How easily his uncle might trace him, bring him home in disgrace, clap him into the very jail of which no less a person than Bart's late father-in-law had been the warder!

Perhaps into the brief span of time he spent with Pudgie, there might have crept some element of lightness, of home-building and happiness, had it not been for that dreadful, haunting fear of detection and the law. He used to tilt his hat and avert his head whenever he passed a policeman on the street.

One very definite, regrettable result of his wrongdoing had been the closing of the door of appeal to his two brothers, Josh and Gill. He had counted on them but he had not reckoned on his own nature. In the dreary, anxious winter that ensued, there had been many an occasion when he would gratefully have turned to Josh for medical advice. He did not dare. Pudgie, almost from the first week, had been wretched with morning nausea and indigestion. It used to tear at Bart's heart to see how she exerted herself to be cheerful when he came home tired at night, to observe the effort she had made to have ready a filling meal for him.

The day after their wedding, he had obtained work as a dish-washer in a Greek restaurant across the street from their hotel. He and Pudgie had moved then; they had found a room, a bath, and a sink on Turk Street for twenty dollars a month. Half of Bart's ill-gotten wealth furnished it haphazardly and in "356-A" they had known all the joy and sorrow of their short wedded life together.

Bart soon learned he could earn more than a dollar-and-a-half a day, at work less degrading. He first applied at the office of the California Fruit Packers' Association and obtained a job as checker; thence he progressed to a fruit commission house, and within a few weeks a casual acquaintance secured him a steady clerical position in the Freight Department of the Southern Pacific Railroad. He considered himself the luckiest of men. His office was in the Merchants' Exchange Building. He did not have to be there until nine o'clock, and he had a desk to himself in the Chief Clerk's office, with a daily routine of making out rebate orders for the Chief Clerk to sign. For this inexacting labor, he was paid handsomely in gold at the end of every month the sum of seventy-five dollars.

It should have been enough. At least it would have been enough, Bart said to himself, reviewing these months of his life, if Pudgie had only been well. She had tried to make ends meet; she was desperately eager to have their union a success; she wanted to "show 'em back home." Ever loving, ever anxious to please, ever willing to set aside her own pleasure and her own will for his. Poor Pudgie! He saw her, distended, cumbersome, waddling and puffing about their small cluttered room, those dreary last days of that February!

The baby unexpectedly arrived one night; it had not been due for a month. There was a scramble, a wild ride in a swaying ambulance to an all-too-distant hospital. He remembered the sickening smell of disinfectants, of chloroform, of the composition-rubber floor covering in the reception room, of the hours he had waited, seemingly forgotten. Toward early morning he was awakened. A gray-faced doctor in white stood blinking kindly at him through rimmed spectacles.

The baby had come—a fine, well formed boy, apparently sound in every way, but there had been something organically wrong; respiration had ceased shortly after delivery. Mrs. Carter was doing—well, she was doing as well as could be expected. . . . . There should have been an earlier examination . . . . evidences of uremic poisoning . . . .

At eight o'clock, they came to him again, this time asking him to go upstairs; Mrs. Carter was unconscious and sinking . . . .

He stood beside her bed, strangely unmoved, watching her, white and drawn, a hideous ice-pack upon her waxen forehead, watching her struggle for air, her purple lips parting with each labored exhalation, her cheeks fluttering desperately each time she sucked for breath. Then the horror of it swept over him, the pitifulness and pathetic littleness of her caught and inexorably crushed beneath life's iron wheels. He had not grieved for himself; he had only felt desperately sorry for her.

So long ago! Nine years last February!

§ 2

And then?

Bart passed a troubled hand across his closed eyes.

How soon he had forgotten! How soon he had shaken off the whole tragedy! How soon he had put out of his mind and out of his life the recollection of their humble, struggling days, the memory of her cuteness and devotion, the awful suddenness of her death, the image of his infant son, the gruesomeness of the lonely funeral with only weeping Mrs. Cook to bear him company, a sniveling, boo-hooing woman whose tears and reproaches left him cold and unmoved!

Had there been an immediate sense of freedom? He had not acknowledged it at once, but he soon did. He had never loved Pudgie, though he had grown to be sorry for her and fond of her. Intellectually, she had been a dreary companion with never a thought for a book or a poem or even for a thing of beauty. She was cuddling, cute, and hungry for love—that always!—but she had given him nothing else.

Within a week of her death, he had picked up his pen again. His first effort was a sonnet he called "Crepusculum," and upon an impulse he mailed it to *The Overland Monthly.* To his pleased surprise, the editor wrote he would be glad to accept it and would send him five dollars when it was published.

Those early years in San Francisco . . . .!

The earthquake and fire in 1906 brought the first half of his life there to a close.

He had continued with the railroad, had come to know some of his fellow clerks better and had made a close friend of Harvey Kenyon. Likable, harum-scarum Harvey! They had been much together, had learned to know the different bars and the best free-lunch counters, had patronized the Orpheum on Saturday nights, the Beach on Sundays. It was Harvey who had introduced Bart to "The Abbey."

"The Abbey" had been no more nor less than a bachelor's boarding house, but it was operated much like a club. Not every casual, unattached young man was permitted to live there. A board composed of the older residents looked the applicant over and passed upon his qualifications. "The Abbey" of San Francisco at that time was an institution. Young doctors, lawyers, brokers, insurance men, an occasional hopeful writer or struggling musician was the type of young man who resided there. All were deeply interested in life, more deeply in success. One by one they married, and at each vacancy a new "Abbeyite" was elected. Board and room came to approximately forty dollars a month, but Kenyon and Bart saved money by sharing quarters.

Bart had thrilled to his new atmosphere. Most of the men were older, but they accepted him on an equality of good fellowship. They ate together at large round tables in a basement dining room, played pool and cards in the lounge upstairs, gossiped, smoked, "ragged and joshed," enjoying life and one another. For the newcomer it was tremendously educational.

He asked the Chief Clerk for a raise and got it, but it was not enough to meet the new demands upon him. Little by little, month by month, he fell into debt. He spent too much money on clothes, at "penny ante," in treating, in Orpheum seats, in taking casual skylarking girls to the Beach. Days of carefree, happy youth! He was not at all interested in his work; he was vastly interested in having a good time.

The earthquake in 1906 rudely shook him out of bed on the morning of April 18th. His bureau had rolled out into the middle of the room and fallen on its face, his books had come tumbling down from the rack above his head, and the plaster directly above Harvey's bed had loosened in a slab and buried Harvey from sight, fortunately without injuring him.

There followed four days of heat, smoke, excitement, and fun. "The Abbey" was burned to the ground in the early morning hours of the succeeding day. Bart saved only a suitcase full of clothing. The next three nights he spent with a fellow "Abbeyite," Freddy St. John, and several thousand other homeless San Franciscans in the open stretches of the Presidio.

Throughout the next three days of fire and confusion, he had no sense of personal calamity. He soon learned the 'quake had not extended as far south as Los Robles, that the Benign Egg & Milk Emporium had been neither injured nor burned, and he had known for some time that Gill had left early in the year for New York. Except for himself and his suitcase, he had no responsibility nor obligation. It had all been a great, glorious adventure.

Fascinated by a number of the amusing episodes and sorrowful tragedies around him among the rich and poor, all summarily leveled to a common denominator of living, and roughly quartered in crazily erected army tents, Bart had borrowed Freddy St. John's typewriter and written a description of what he saw. The third night of the fire, he sat with his back against a pine tree in the Presidio Reservation, the antiquated Remington on a box between his knees, and poked out his copy with forefingers of either hand, while the red blaze in the sky gave him all the light he needed.

Life all too quickly readjusted itself. By the first of May, he found himself with Harvey Kenyon, Freddy St. John, and a fourth companion, living in a rented cottage on the Berkeley side of the Bay, employing a Japanese boy to cook and care for them.

Soon after, he had secured his position on the morning *Call*. Freddy had obtained that job for him. Bart's earthquake anecdotes were front-paged in the New York *Times,* and that journal had telegraphed him to send on all the "stuff" he could give them. His articles were edited, cut, and rewritten, but his name was signed to them, and the notoriety had landed him his cub reportership on the San Francisco paper.

Success had promptly gone to his head. He shuddered to remember how like a fool he had behaved—a fool even about Norah . . . . and what a terrible fool he had been about her!

Twenty-five years old, and they all thought well of him on the *Call!* Every once in a while he would see something he had written on the front page, and on one or two occasions, they had credited it to him by name. His new newspaper friends gathered him in, took him to their hearts, leagued together to flatter and cajole him, deliberately setting themselves to bait and make fun of him. The memory still hurt! Applause had all been with "the tongue in the cheek." Wat, the city editor, warned him. Twice he had sent for him and talked to him "like a Dutch uncle." Bart had no ears to hear him. He was infatuated with his exaltation, considering himself a genius in embryo.

"They?"

First of all, there had been Norah Sue Crothers, and then Michael Ury, Ben Breyfogle, and that snip, Morgan George Cowden—precious literary dilettantes all, who foregathered at the "Fly Trap" and the new "Red Ink," Italian restaurants, quickly thrown together to capture the trade of burned "Coppa's" and "Sanguinetti's." "They" had been would-be poets, self-elected critics and wiseacres, who mixed their own salads and talked indiscriminately of free love and art. Freddy was one of the group. Oh, there were four or five others; Bart couldn't recall their names. They patted him on the back, told him he was clever, even persuaded him to recite some of his early poetry—that crude, formless verse born of his boyish soul! They listened with turned-up eyes and rapt faces, and declared it good. He believed them. He believed Norah Sue Crothers. She was supposed to know whereof she spoke. And he had fallen so hard for her, had reverenced her, worshiped her! He used to think when she turned smiling eyes upon him, "God Himself had set a rainbow in the sky!" . . . .

Ah, well, it *had* been sweet at first. He had known, of course, that Norah had had a lover before him; perhaps there had been more, he hadn't cared. He knew only that her lips and embraces were what he lived for. During the days, when he was at the office or on an assignment, or when he sat huddled over his machine in the smoke-filled, bawling office trying to concentrate, the thought of her would come to him, and he would dream of her mouth, her cheek, her neck, her loving, caressing hands, and his yearning would be fiercer than any emotion he had ever known.

They rented a small flat together, and life settled down to an idyllic dream for Bart, a paradise of love and perfect companionship. He remembered the first night he had lain by Norah's side; he had been so transported, he had not slept, nor wished to sleep, content to lie quietly beside her, not daring even to look at her for fear of disturbing her, happy beyond the bounds of anything he had ever imagined, satisfied as he had never hoped to be satisfied.

Norah wrote poetry too, very much better poetry than his own. Bart thought her verses exquisite. She also was on a newspaper, an evening sheet, and was a feature writer of years' standing. Norah was wise and balanced and beautiful. She had poise, knew the ways of the world. Bart was aware she was admired. He believed she possessed everything a man looked for in a woman. Why she should prefer him, be willing to live with him, was beyond his comprehension. . . . . God, what a fool he had been!

Perhaps she *had* liked him at first, perhaps there *had* been a feeling of real sentiment in the beginning. Certainly, during their first months, they had been tremendously happy.

One memorable night they made their way across the Bay to Idora Park and witnessed a performance of *The Tales of Hoffmann* at the theater within the grounds. It was their introduction to Offenbach, and both had been enraptured. On the ferry boat returning to the city, they sat out on deck. A glorious moon blazed a glittering path across the waters silhouetting the black hulk of a monster battleship at anchor.

The air was soft, beguiling, the only breeze, warm and scented. Norah rested her head against his shoulder and softly sang:

" 'Night divine, O night of love,
O smile on our caresses;
Moon and stars, keep watch above,
This radiant night of love!' "

Bart was drunk with happiness.

Hardly a month later came the terrible moment of awakening. He rose one morning to discover himself diseased. Norah was the only answer. He refused to believe it and for forty-eight hours went about with his secret locked in his breast, wondering, agonizing over the situation, until, driven by doubt and jealousy, he had confronted her, demanded an explanation, and she had admitted with some tears, but not too many, the truth of his accusation.

Everything turned black and crazy then. Life became unendurable; to think, a horror. He ceased to care about his job or himself; he wanted only to escape his thoughts. Drink had offered a way, and he had remained drunk for ten days. Harvey Kenyon found him in an upstairs room in a road-house near the Beach, managed to make him come home with him, talked to him and tried to persuade him to pull himself together. Bart had lost his perceptions; his brain no longer functioned normally. With uncertain step, trembling hands, twitching mouth, he reported back to the office, and Wat Fogarty lectured him, warned him he would give him one more chance, but it would be the last. Bart listened. He watched Wat's moving lips, he understood the city editor was speaking harshly, he knew what Wat desired and threatened, but it did not seem to apply to himself at all. It was exactly as if Wat was giving a call-down to Jimmy Coogan, "Slats" Murphy, or one of the other boys.

For two days, he moved in and out of the city room in a stupor, hardly hearing what was said to him, vaguely answering questions, voluntarily speaking to no one. Then one day Ben Breyfogle walked in.

Bart had no particular grievance against Breyfogle; he had never thought of him in connection with Norah, nor had it ever occurred to him the man had been intimate with her, but the sight of him brought the image of the girl vividly before him and loosed the fury pent up in his heart. He flung himself on Benny, knocked him down, and kicked him savagely. It happened in mid-morning, just as the boys were getting their assignments. They dragged him off, tied him into a chair, and when Breyfogle had been helped from the room and Bart calmed down, Wat told him to draw his pay and get out.

He had not cared. He had not cared when he realized his attack on Breyfogle had been unwarranted; he had not even cared when Harvey Kenyon called him a damn fool and told him he was "done" with him. There was surcease from all these worries in whisky, and Bart had kept himself saturated as long as his money lasted. When it was gone, he had begged for it in the street.

For a month he had lived so. At night he slept on newspapers in an uptown park; by day, he slunk along in the shadows, slipping in and out of the meanest saloons on Fillmore Street, stealing a handful of free lunch, doing an odd job now and then to earn enough money for another quart.

His sickness caught up with him at last. The day came when pain and physical weakness prevented him from pursuing even so miserable an existence. The police picked him up, landed him in the City and County Hospital, and there, after a fortnight's enforced discipline and care, sanity began to return.

Slowly it dawned on him that, do what he would, he must pick up the threads of life again and go on, that just wishing it could not bring oblivion. He had become fearfully emaciated; his neglected ailment had played havoc with his body. In his run-down condition, the thought of getting well and starting anew used to make him weakly cry into his pillow.

It was the thought of Father Francis that helped most to clear his brain. Throughout the many hours of the day and wakeful ones at night, his mind dwelt upon the priest. He felt hungry for a contact with the man, the need of his spirituality and understanding, his arm about his shoulders.

One day he asked a friendly interne to send word to him at the Cathedral, and the next day Father Francis appeared at the hospital. He had seemed like Christ Himself, as, tall, smiling sadly and kindly, he came up the aisle between the beds of the ward to the cot on which Bart lay.

Then with tears that wet his cheeks and ran in wriggles across his nose, the thin, strong hand of Father Francis holding his, Bart told his story, told of the profitless ten years, of his own wantonness, of Norah, his contamination, his depravity, the degradation into which he had sunk—and with the telling of it, and the pressure now and then of the hand which so firmly held his own, somehow the hurt that Norah had left behind, the anguish that had tormented him, ran out of him as if a stopper had been pulled away and the dirty water dammed up within him had found an outlet.

The next day, Father Francis brought Doctor Dan to see him, and on the following one, the two brothers lifted him in their arms, carried him from the ward, down the stairs, out of the hospital, to place him carefully in the back seat of an automobile, and, the priest holding him so that the jounces would not throw him about too much, Dan drove him to his own home.

A long time ago, it seemed! Dan's wife, Louise, waited on him, petted him; Dan, himself, talked and advised; Father Francis came to chat almost daily. Bart could remember the exact moment when the sense of physical foulness passed from him just as the foulness in his heart had gone.

What men these brothers were!

They had saved him physically and spiritually, cleaning his body and his mind, rebuilding him, giving him back his health and self-respect.

They told him the past was the past; they told him he could right himself with Nature and with God; they told him he needed only to refill his wasted soul with courage and with faith to live again, and to live wisely and to good purpose, and he believed them.

The fingers of the hands across his eyes were wet now. He moved them and wiped away the moisture from his cheeks.

An overwhelming love for these brothers, sisters, and cousins of his, a rising, swelling, mounting sense of the great goodness in the world, filled Bart's heart almost to bursting.

CHAPTER III

§ I

BART was slowly and carefully descending the stairs, one hand on the balustrade, the other to the wall, when Jane's voice from the dining room reached him.

"That horrible woman ought to be shut up; she's a disgrace to the community. She lives over there in Guadalupe and welcomes any man that comes along. She's positively mentally deficient. I don't know how many rickety children she's brought into the world. Eight, by the last count. The Welfare Society, that's always talking so much about its philanthropy, does nothing more than dole out charity to her and her miserable progeny—not one of them is normal—and maintains them in their depravity. If Jo were here, she'd soon shut her up and put those poor diseased youngsters into institutions. I'm going to talk to Father Gillespie next time I see him, but I don't want Bart to know anything about the matter. After all, the woman's his sister-in-law . . . ."

There was an interval, and in the pause the man on the stairs hurried his descent, fearing more might be said not intended for his ears. It was his first attempt at coming down to breakfast, and he had in mind to surprise Jane and her sister.

The girls had been lingering over the morning meal. Bart was sure they had been sitting at the table for the better part of an hour, nibbling grapes or toast, murmuring, gossiping. Jack, who had breakfasted at seven, long ago had departed on ranch affairs. The front windows were open, the sheer white curtains gustily billowing inwards, and the house was fragrant with the sweet smell of honeysuckle.

The two women looked up as he entered.

"Bart Carter!"

"Why, whatever are you doing downstairs?"

"Oh, Bart, I'm so sorry; I had no idea it was so late, because Janey and I were sitting here, talking about nothing, and I was coming up with your tray in five minutes."

"My dear child, that's quite all right," he said, smiling; "I woke about eight, and lay there thinking, and then it occurred to me to get up and come down. I could hear you talking and laughing, and I smelled bacon."

"Well, now, you sit right down here in Jack's place, and Peg will get your breakfast in a jiffy. Don't bother Hilda, Peg; she's rinsing out the sitting-room curtains. . . . . Here, Bart—sit here in the armchair; I'll brush those crumbs away, and, Peg dear, bring a clean napkin."

"This is perfect nonsense, Jane. I'm not sick any more. I refuse to be treated like an invalid."

"I declare, you're getting well altogether too fast to suit me——"

"Good Lord, my dear, I can't quarter myself on you and Jack for life——"

"Fiddlesticks! You must know how we love having you. It's given everyone of us the greatest possible pleasure. Jack was saying so only this morning. Imagine what it's meant to him to take care of his brother! And Peg's loved it too. The child gets lonesome at times; the poor dear hasn't much to divert her."

Peggy came in at this moment, bearing his coffee and fruit, announcing that the toast and eggs would be done directly. Her sister took the tray from her and, while Peggy stood flutteringly by, arranged the cutlery, plates, and food in front of her brother-in-law. The women seated themselves then on either side of him, solicitously catering to his wants as he ate, and presently Peggy went kitchenward to bring in the balance of his meal.

"You know, Jane," she delivered herself, returning, "I don't think Hilda knows a blessed thing about rinsing those curtains because she's actually boiling the stuff, and the package said distinctly that the curtains, or whatever it was you wanted to wash, ought to be just dipped in, and I think——"

"I'll go out there in a minute. Lord, that woman will drive me to insanity! I could do twice the work she does in half the time. Bart dear, you're not eating your muffins; they may be cold now, but they were awfully good. . . . . Do you know anything about dehydrating, Bart?"

"Not a thing in the world."

"Well, there was a man here yesterday, who wanted to talk about it to Jack . . . ."

The conversation flowed on pleasantly.

"I have no business to be sitting here idling this way," Jane said at length, with a distressed frown.

"It's pleasant sometimes to sit and idle."

"You can't do that when you've a big house to run."

"Darling, I'm not reproaching you!"

"I understand, but I've a million things on my mind this morning."

"What would you do if you had a flock of children to look after in addition?" Bart inquired casually. "Oh, I don't mean a mob like Eva Ann's, but say four or five, or a couple like Trudie's?"

Jane straightened herself, smoothing the front of her trim gingham dress, and shook the spirals of golden hair that had escaped from the snugly drawn net.

"I'm sure I don't know. I'd love a child or two, but I have my hands full as it is. Jack and I would like to see ourselves a little more comfortably fixed before we have a baby."

"Well, you can't whistle a child into the family the way you'd call a dog," Bart observed.

Jane's lips tightened, and her nostrils dilated a little. He saw he had offended her, and hastened to temper his remark, but she wished to dispose of the implied reflection. It was obvious her next words were especially intended for Peggy.

"It's all very well for you to say a thing like that, Bart, but children, while they may be a great blessing, may be a great calamity as well. Your own mother lost her figure, her youth, and eventually her health by having nine of you in a row, and Aunt Lizzie just threw her life away—wasn't a bit of use to her husband or her family—by having too many children. When I think of the poor little things she brought into the world! Not one of the last four lived—and some of them were born before they ought to have been. And look at Eva Ann! . . . . No, I hope in all good time, our gracious Lord will send Jack and me a child or two, or perhaps three or four, but no more than we can properly provide for. You should hear what my sister Jo has to say on the subject——"

"Please, please, Jane dear, I didn't mean to trample on your feelings——"

"Jack's a most considerate husband——"

"Of course he is."

"—and I sincerely hope we'll have a family sometime, and a lovely one."

Peggy laid an affectionate hand upon her sister's agitated one.

"And when *you* come to marry," Jane said, suddenly focusing her attention upon her, "I most earnestly pray you won't burden yourself with a lot of children before you're ready for them!"

She smoothed the breast of her dress again and compressed her lips.

"Well, that's enough of that," she resumed, in a calmer tone; "I must be about my household duties. . . . . Peg, dear, I'd like you—if you find the time—to cut that sample from the underside of the stuff covering the couch. I figure we'll need about six yards for the pillows. . . . . Now, Bart darling, you take it easy. Is Medcraft coming this morning?"

" 'Bout ten. I expect he'll be wanting me to come over to see *him* next week. It's a long trip from Guadalupe. Anyway, I think it's utterly ridiculous my continuing with him. I know I'm all right again. I'm going to write Josh—or Dan, as I suppose I should remember to call him, now."

"I'm going to try to start work on some writing to-day," he continued after a moment while he frowned at his plate; "oh, it isn't going to be much. An adventure story, I guess; something that will sell. I've been reading a few of the yarns in *Street and Smith's,* and I'll be hanged if I don't think I could write one as good, maybe better—a story packed full of hidden treasure, hold-ups, and murder. You don't remember my father, do you, Jane?"

"Oh, yes, very well. I remember his limp and the way he always used to say, 'by dun.' "

"He was a great story-teller, and he could spin some grand yarns about the old quicksilver mines at Almaden. I thought I'd try my hand at one, anyway. When Manuel, or one of the boys, goes into the village, will you ask him to get some typewriting paper and a ribbon? I always like to copy my stuff."

"Surely; I'll speak to him."

He saw Peggy looking at him with round, soulful eyes, and smiled back at her.

"Sis, dear, pour Bart's milk back into the pitcher, he didn't touch it, and we must let Hilda get in here to clear away. No, you mustn't help, Peg. It's *her* work, and she's supposed to do it. You just demoralize her. I don't care whether she's busy rinsing those curtains, or not; she's got to understand that things like that I ask her to do, mustn't interfere with her regular duties."

At the moment, Hilda bumped open the pantry door with her hip, wiping her hands on her damp apron.

"The plumber's here, Mis' Carter."

Jane at once rose to her feet.

"Oh, I must see that scamp," she said, departing with firm, determined tread. Peggy commenced surreptitiously to pile the dishes, while Bart went out to the veranda to roll a cigarette.

There was plenty of autumn noticeable in the air to-day. A brisk breeze was blowing. Eddies of fluttering leaves from the neighboring orchards, and hard, dry, crackling ones from the oaks, went scurrying, somersaulting across the lawn. Its green expanse was littered with broken twigs and crisp yellow foliage. A pale sun lighted a colorless sky, streaked with horses' tails.

"Rain not so very far off," Bart was thinking, when a shabby automobile lumbered in at the front gate, followed the driveway behind the screen of trees, and Doctor Medcraft, white of hair, and ponderous of step, descended at the front stoop and accompanied Bart to his room.

In twenty minutes the physician was prepared to depart. His patient was "out of the woods," he pronounced; he might consider himself cured, but there must be no carousing or going back to bad habits. Bart smiled his reassurance.

Peggy joined them as they were parting, and, at her cousin's suggestion and with the old doctor's approval, she agreed to ride as far as Carterville, to help Bart select his typewriting paper and carbon, and walk back with him.

Bart, on several occasions of late, had driven through the streets of the village, and to-day he marveled anew at the rapidity with which the original handful of houses was becoming a fair-sized town. Carterville had an Odd Fellows Building of its own, now, and more than that, a Woodmen's Hall. There was a brick bank, a Growers' Hotel, and a hostelry known as "Plunkett's"; the old General Store had been enlarged, refashioned, and rechristened. Center Street boasted cement sidewalks. Half a dozen saloons did a flourishing business, two enterprising grocery and hardware stores carried on a rivalry, while Ulrich Wyss had plans, so Peggy said, for opening another butcher shop and driving old Herman Neustadter out of business. Electric light had come to Carterville, and there was talk of extending the Gilroy–Guadalupe trolley line to include it and San Geronimo. A score of dusty motor cars lined the curbing in front of the post office, and Japanese, Portuguese, and Mexican ranch-hands filed in and out of the stores and ambled along the streets. The whole district had been divided and was being further subdivided into small orchards, while the heights below La Canada Pass were dotted with vineyards.

Having made his purchases, stopped for the mail, and bought Peggy an ice-cream soda at Fuller's Candy Parlor, Bart and the girl commenced their leisurely return to Los Robles.

The aspect of the countryside, too, had changed. Dusty roads were now culverted and guttered. Orderly orchards came down neatly to their sides, and the trees stretched away in long even lines which seemed to revolve as one moved by them like the thousand-odd spokes of a gigantic wheel. The once wild government cattle ranges were billowing with a canopy of green treetops; water, welled, flumed, channeled and directed, had wrought the miracle.

Sauntering homeward, Bart thought of the ineffectual struggles of his Uncle Stephen. He and Peggy were passing at the moment the property he once had owned. Beneath its phalanx of sturdy prune trees, upon a clodless level of neatly harrowed earth, a score of Japanese, mostly children, crawled about, picking up the fat purple fruit, strewn thickly upon the ground. Piles of boxes, already full, were stacked twenty feet apart, and stood eight and ten deep. A banner crop they represented, the fruit, large and heavy with sugar, running, so Bart estimated, five ton to the acre.

He spoke of the tragedy of his uncle and aunt.

"I suppose it was largely Aunt Lizzie's fault," Peggy offered cheerfully; "just as Janey said this morning. She had too many children, and too many troubles, and I reckon she didn't know how to manage."

"I don't think Uncle Stephen did, either."

"Why is it that some people succeed and some people fail?" Peggy asked. "Everybody tries so hard and everybody *wants* success, and I'm sure the Lord never meant to have it that way, and it doesn't seem right for people to be punished in this life and the next one too, does it?"

Bart smiled at her troubled air. He found something refreshing in this young cousin of his.

"Now, look at Jack and Jane," she went on: "it seems to me they're planning so wisely and working so hard to attain the goal they've set for themselves, for nobody could be more ideally happy or have a lovelier home." Her voice trailed off sadly. Bart glanced at her, but she gave no hint of what distressed her.

The wind had lessened, and there came drifting to them the hot smell of ripe fruit drying in the sun. In a clearing where once had stood Uncle Stephen's corrals, half an acre of ground was covered with prune trays, edge to edge. The fruit was not so brilliantly colored as the apricots, but there was something spectacularly rich and regal about the deep violet-hued carpet. More Japanese were busy there, unloading, packing, stacking, arranging. They worked in silence, Bart noted, and with prodigious industry.

His thoughts reverted to himself and the future. He had no desire to follow Jack's example and spend the rest of his days in and about Carterville. The fruit industry did not interest him; he saw only what was drab and repetitiously dull in it.

Two thousand dollars was coming to him, his share of Los Robles, and Jack had told him the money was in the bank and his whenever he wanted it. There were his debts in San

Francisco; he had been shocked at the total of what he owed and had borrowed, and one of the things he wanted most to do was to pay back the two hundred dollars he had stolen ten years before. Philo was dead, but the money belonged to the ranch, and Bart was determined Jack should take it for whatever disposition he thought proper.

There would be a little over three hundred left, three hundred dollars with which to begin life over again, three hundred to start out on a literary career!

"I don't want to go back to San Francisco," he said out of a silence; "too many unpleasant associations there and too many convivially inclined friends. I'd like to try my luck in New York; that's the place where recognition comes quickest to a writer."

"I *adore* New York!" cried Peggy.

"Oh, I know I've never been there," she admitted in a rush. answering his look, "but I adore it just the same, and adore to read about it, and stories with scenes laid there, because ever since I saw an article in *Munsey's,* illustrated with I don't know how many full-page photographs, showing the Flatiron Building, the skyscrapers, the Battery, the harbor, and all, I've sort of felt, in a way I can't express, that New York belongs to me. I'm positively going there one of these days, to see it for myself."

" 'Give my regards to Broadway,' " she sang, " 'remember me to Herald Square.' Hilda's got that on her Victrola.

"Oh, I know Fifth Avenue and Forty-second Street *well!*" she finished with a laugh.

"You probably know them better than I do," he said.

"I tell you, I'm going there; I'll manage it, by hook or by crook, someway."

"Why, what's the matter? Aren't you happy here?"

Her high spirits faded with the question, and her childish face took on a far-away expression.

"I suppose I ought to be," she said wistfully, "but it isn't particularly living—not for me."

"Yes—" he nodded with understanding—"I can see it isn't particularly living—for you."

She offered nothing.

"I wish I knew how to land a job on one of the newspapers back there," he said, after a little. "The *Times* ran my fire-and-earthquake stuff, you know."

"Yes, I know," she repeated tonelessly. She was studying the ground pensively as she kept pace with him.

"If this blood-and-thunder story I have in mind turns out to be any good," he went on, "and I place it with a magazine, I'm going East."

There was still no comment from the girl. The gayety that had illuminated her throughout the afternoon appeared to be snuffed out. Her seriousness presently drew his question, and to a second query she lifted her head, and he saw with concern that her eyes had tears in them.

"I suppose I'm horribly ungrateful," she said, on a long quivering breath; "they do everything for me, they dress me and feed me and think for me, but that isn't living; I want more than that, and not grow up like a hothouse plant. I want to live my own life, do what Josephine did, run away and be a trained nurse or something. Oh, dear, why isn't it possible for me to go with you when you go to New York, find something to do there, and be myself? Everyone else in the family's done it! There're just you and me left!"

Her emotion surprised him; he had not credited her with such spirit. Ten years ago, he had voiced the same plaint.

"Why don't you write Jo?" he suggested. "She's tremendously resourceful, might get you something to do, or, when she goes back to Philadelphia, she might take you with her."

"You don't know Jo. She's entirely sufficient unto herself. She doesn't want any sister complicating her life."

"Then Gill. Why not send him a letter? He ought to be able to get you some kind of a job on that trade journal of his."

"Oh . . . ." Peggy spread out her hands, indicating she was done with the subject.

"I may some day," she added, giving no thought to the remark, and as by this time they had reached the house, her face brightened at sight of her sister seated on the veranda, and she hurried forward with:

" 'Lo, darling. Here's the mail . . . ."

§ 2

There were letters from Camilla, Trudie, and a postcard from Jo showing a reproduction of an architect's sketch of the proposed Campanile soon to be erected on the Berkeley campus.

Camilla wrote in her pleasant, cheerful vein, saying that she and Franklin were well and thriving. It had been frightfully hot in Los Angeles with that hot moist heat never experienced at Los Robles no matter where the thermometer stood. Franklin had been putting in some new bookshelves; their three rooms above the shop were entirely adequate for their needs and were so easy to keep in order! For Christmas, they had placed some "enormous" orders and had found the publishers most considerate. Several of them had given special discounts just to help them along. The summer had been simply dreadful, no business at all, but the holiday season should make up for it. The year before, they had had a three-hundred-dollar profit, and they ought to make twice as much this year. Was there ever any chance of Jane or Jack coming south for a visit? It was good news about Bart. Jane was to be sure to give him his big sister's love. Franklin spoke of him in the most affectionate terms always and often said Bart would some day be a writer . . . .

Trudie's news was not so happy. Little Jerry had been sick, and just as soon as he was well again, Doctor Dan advised his tonsils coming out. Leo, the other twin, had had an upset too: the lady in the flat next door had given him a pear to eat, and it had been covered with that horrible arsenic spray which growers sometimes use to protect the fruit from insects! In the midst of all this, Jerome insisted upon moving. They had been looking high and low for an apartment, but, since the fire, there was nothing vacant and rents were the limit. . . . . Bart was to be told that Jerome had met a friend of his in the bank, a Mr. Harvey Kenyon, who seemed awfully glad to learn that Bart was all right again. Trudie sent a kiss. . . . . And, by the way, had Jane seen in the papers that awful story about a "Lottie Carter" in Salinas. Of course, it *must* be their Lottie, although Jerome said it was by no means certain. Anyway, the paper stated—Trudie thought she'd read it in the

Bulletin—a woman by the name of "Lottie Carter" had been caught with a married man, and the man's wife had gone after her with a whip or a stick or something, and had had her arrested. It might not be their cousin, but the "Salinas" part of it certainly made it look as if it were. Jerome said not to believe everything you read in the newspapers. . . . .

Jo's postcard, in Jo's fine, feminine hand, announced that summer school was over, that everybody was coming back and getting ready for the fall term, that she was living at the K K G house, and the weather was divine.

"You never hear anything from Eva Ann, do you?" Bart asked, when this news had been discussed.

"She hasn't time to write," Jane observed.

"I don't believe she's ever forgiven any of us for the way she was sort of shown the door when she and Tony eloped," Peggy commented.

"That good-for-nothing loafer!"

"Oh, Janey, he isn't that! He works."

"Well, he ought to work a lot harder."

"He works as hard as he can."

"I say he ought to work harder with a family that size."

"It's too bad Frank and Camilla can't take two of them," Peggy said injudiciously, thinking of the children.

Her sister, with the breakfast table conversation still rankling, took her up at once.

"And why should Frank and Camilla saddle themselves with two children belonging to somebody else? What's the matter with their own children when they come along? Frank and Cam are waiting a decent length of time until they get on their feet and are sure of an income. *Then* raise a family. I think it's very sensible of them, instead of going ahead promiscuously and having one child after another as fast as Nature allows. . . . ."

Bart leveled a puzzled glance at his sister-in-law. He was on the point of asking how Nature was to be controlled, wondering just what latitude in the matter pretty, discursive Jane allowed herself, and how she reconciled it with the Church's attitude on the subject, but he thought better of it. The discussion and what, on a sudden, seemed to him a lot of senseless gabble, wearied him. He passed a hand across his forehead and was surprised to find it damp. The day was turning warm, the breeze had died, and fruit flies were beginning to be bothersome.

"I think I'll go up and lie down for a while," he said. "The walk's kind of taken it out of me. I really want to get a start on that story this afternoon."

"Do that," encouraged Jane, "and I'll call you in time for dinner."

Peggy, giving him a radiant smile, added:

"I'll say a prayer for you."

§ 3

He removed his shoes and coat to stretch himself gratefully on his bed. He had grown to love this room with its gay wall paper of twining roses and cross-barred pink muslin curtains. A mammoth, python-twisting limb of one of the oak trees lifted itself just past an upper corner of the window; the sun, shining through the leaves, threw dappled shadows of gray sequins upon the floor and against the thin folds of the bright material. Sometimes in the early mornings a woodpecker tapping against the mighty branch awoke him pleasantly.

At this particular hour of this particular day, the ranch was humming with noises, large and small. There was a dog barking excitedly not far away, and the hens in Jane's near-by chicken yard, were making a great clucking in fear of a hawk. From the crowded packing shed, there arose a steady pulsing drone as the laden boxes of prunes piled in from the orchard floors, the bourdon punctuated rhythmically with the chug-chugging of the motor truck. A distant whanging of iron on iron reached him from the machine shop, and below stairs an intermittent clapping of the kitchen screen door .... Hilda thumping an iron .... the sound of slopping water from the region of the horse trough where Manuel was hosing off Jack's Buick .... the bite of a whirling saw cutting g-r-r-r-r into a log, and the cough of a gas engine .... Jane, calling a sharp admonition from the front door: "Pl-ease don't leave her there! Take her round to the back. She'll eat all the bark off that maple if you tie her there!" .... Jack's good-natured answer .... hollow hooves on the hard macadam .... Peggy's voice, melodious, eager, protesting: "I don't want to grow up like a hothouse plant. I want to live my own life, do what Josephine did. . . . . Oh, dear, why isn't it possible for me to go with you when you go to New York and find something to do there. . . . . I adore New York!" . . . . A squeaking Victrola, grinding out:

> " 'Tell all the boys on Forty-second Street
> That I will soon be there . . . .' "

He fell asleep.

§ 4

October came in, misty and autumnal. November brought night frosts and fine days of thin sunshine and tingling air. The trees were being vigorously pruned, and burning heaps of branches, a few leaves still adhering, left trailing scarves of fragrant smoke through the tattered orchards.

The days settled into a pleasant routine. Peggy bent over her embroidery, became absorbed and excited over the making of a pleated lamp shade, and discussed with her sister the details of organdy dresses for them both. Jane marched efficiently about the house, superintended Manuel on top the stepladder hanging the freshly laundered curtains, oversaw the transplanting of shrubs to bank the driveway near the house, nursed Hilda, down with a quinsy throat, and "put up" five dozen jars of prune pickle. Jack, while showering, broke the early morning quiet by singing snatches from *The Bohemian Girl.* He ate ravenously at meal times, outlining the while a movement on foot to incorporate Carterville and make him one of its first town councilors. And Bart learned to know the sick feeling that came along with a fat envelope in the mail, learned to disguise that feeling, and to pretend with Peggy that she too did not know the meaning of those bulky missives. He learned to put their contents unread into fresh containers and send them forth once more, and learned to school himself to pick up his pen again as if he had experienced no rebuff. But, hardest of all, he learned to be indifferent to the indulgent attitude of Jane and Jack. It was an air of dear-old-Bart's-been-sick-and-now-he-wants-to-try-to-write-something-and-we-must-be-as-kind-as-we-can, and it set his teeth on edge and made him wish to fling his work into their faces. Peggy did not share this attitude. She was eager for him to succeed, not because she had any particular faith in his pen, but because she wanted him to be happy. He kept his stories and his hopes to himself; he could not discuss them with anyone, not even with Peggy, but more than once during those weeks of toil and discouragement, when it happened the girl was aware he had committed a fresh manuscript to the mail, she whispered and once wrote on a slip of paper:

"I'm starting a Novena."

§ 5

The first encouragement came just before Christmas. Mr. Jonathan Crosby, of *Crosby's Magazine,* wrote that he had read "The Hold-up at Almaden" and liked the story; the fight between the miners and the bandits was exciting and well done; if the author could condense the novelette to embrace that incident, making a short story out of it, he would be glad to consider it again. In any case, he would like to see more of Mr. Carter's work.

Bart set himself grimly to the task. At a loss to know where or how to begin he read the story aloud one evening to the family. Jack promptly fell asleep snoring gently, his chin resting on his chest; Jane lent an attentive ear and when he had finished, had fifty suggestions to offer, none of which were either applicable or helpful; Peggy, starry-eyed, listened and thought it was all perfectly wonderful. Bart, his teeth clenched, felt inclined to jam the whole bunch of crinkling pages into the stove.

Yet in Peggy's simple, uncritical admiration, he found help. In some curious way when he read aloud to her, a part of his mind entered her own, and he heard his words through critical ears. Listening, he could detect faults, and perceive what must be done to strengthen, change, or modify. It was astonishing what an enlightening perspective came to him through this simple expedient.

Ever admiring, applauding, was Peggy. Her flattery was pleasant if he cared to listen, but most of the time he did not even hear it.

Sitting opposite to her at the table in the dining room, whither they went in the evenings for these readings and discussions, the warm glow of the hanging center fixture lighting his head and shoulders, the manuscript before him, and illuminating only her weaving white hands and the round embroidering frame they held, he would say:

"Of course, if I made Fernandez suspect the girl of liking José, he wouldn't trust her, would he?"

"Well, perhaps not."

"But then, that might supply Ferdy with an excellent motive for wanting to kill him."

"Yes, that's quite right; it would."

"An' suppose José urged the girl to make up to Ferdy, wouldn't that strengthen the situation a lot?"

"Oh, yes, certainly. You'd have Fernandez jealous of José because he'd think the girl had grown to like him better, and he'd want to kill him, he'd be so jealous, whereas all the time Juanita was thinking only of him and being true to him!"

She would repeat only what he had just said, but his mind would be already weighing other points.

"Well, that will take care of that. Now, listen here, what's wrong with this: 'It was the bandit's Capistrano's revolver.' Sounds screwy. . . . ."

"I don't see what's wrong with it."

"Oh, yes, I do! I'll make it 'it was the revolver belonging to Capistrano, the bandit.' Wait till I fix it."

"Now, don't you think all that about the Bonanza shaft will have to come out?"

"Oh, no, Bart; that description's wonderful about how they were let down by a windlass and how dark it was underground. and how it smelt earthy and the water seeped in through the sides——"

"I'm sorry"; he would stop her: "it will have to go; good background perhaps, but I save three whole pages."

"But, Bart, I think it's so *interesting*. I adore all that description; it's just wonderful."

"And I'll have to cut this about the Indians getting mercury poisoning from the red paint they used."

"No, no, Bart, I can't bear to have you leave that out! You're *ruining* it! Why, that tells how the quicksilver mines were discovered, and it's all so fascinating the way the Indians came to the Mission, and the Padres suspect it's the mercury in the red paint that is killing them——"

"Can't be helped; out it goes."

§ 6

Mr. Jonathan Crosby accepted "The Hold-up at Almaden" in its abbreviated form and sent Bart a check for seventy-five dollars. He promptly took two more short stories, rejected by half a dozen other editors, paying the same sum for one, fifty dollars for the other. He began to write Bart friendly, encouraging letters about his work, and wanted presently to know something about the author himself. Bart sent as much as he hoped would interest him.

The new year had come and gone, the frost was beginning to disappear from the ground, the plows were busy turning up the soil, and the buds on the bare whips of the trees were swollen to the bursting point. Bart had written Mr. Crosby of his eagerness to go to New York and Mr. Crosby had urged him to "come on for a talk"; the editor would like to meet Mr. Carter and discuss his work. Bart began to debate a date for departure.

"I think I'll pull out next week," he announced one evening at the supper table; "I've a new story nearly done, and I might as well wait and finish it up; then I'd like to spend a couple of days in San Francisco, to see Father Francis and Josh——"

"When are you ever going to stop calling him *that!*" Jane chided. "He's 'Doctor J. Daniel' now, and everybody addresses him so."

"I can't think of him as anything else, I guess."

"We'll miss you, Bart," Jack said, wielding a serving spoon and helping himself generously to the meat pie.

"It's been a marvelous year for me," his brother remarked. "I feel remade; you folks have been awfully good."

" 'S been no more than what you'd do for one of us."

"There's been a great deal more to it than just 'the milk of human kindness.' "

"When do you think you'll come back?"

"*Quién sabe?* I hope to stay there. If Crosby will take me on and give me a job, I'll stick. There's nothing for me out here on the Coast."

"You'll see Gill."

"Yes, I've thought of him. If Crosby turns me down, I'll strike Gill for a job on his trade journal. I want to stay in New York if I can."

"It's a pretty big place."

"I know, but I'm sure to like it. I'll be in the center of things there."

"You'll write and tell us all about the shops and theaters, won't you? Don't be like your uncommunicative brother Gill."

"Oh, I shan't. Why, you and Jack have been simply *wonderful* to me! I'll never forget your kindness."

"Give us an idea what the women are wearing."

"I'll do my best."

"And I want to hear all about Coney Island."

"Look in at the Hoffman House bar; I hear it's a pippin."

"Oh, and Fifth Avenue!"

"And the leg shows!"

"Jack *Carter!* Behave yourself!"

The silent girl on the other side of the table drew Bart's eyes. Peggy sat, looking down at her plate, her head lowered, hands in her lap. It occurred to him his leaving would mean a good deal to her. Well, he would be sorry to say good-bye, too. She'd been a decided help to him; he'd enjoyed their talks; he'd miss reading aloud to her.

The conversation veered to other topics, and presently, supper ending, Hilda came in to clear. The men lingered over a corner of the table, smoking, but when Jack departed in the direction of his office, and Bart looked for Peggy, she was nowhere to be found. He called upstairs for her. She did not answer. Disappointed, he sought his room and worked for a couple of hours copying on his typewriter. Towards ten o'clock, he came down to the veranda to fill his lungs with deep breaths of night air and discovered Peggy at her embroidery beside the stove in the sitting room.

"I looked for you after supper," he began, resting his forearms on the square back of the couch on which she was seated; "I wanted to say I'm sorry I'm going East without you, but as soon as I'm there and located, I'll do what I can to find a job for you.

"I've been thinking about that," he continued, "and I don't know how you'd get along. You'd have to live with somebody; maybe Gill's wife would put you up. You know, they don't pay girls much in New York; I read not long ago, that salesgirls at Siegel, Cooper's get only six dollars a week. It's expensive to live in New York."

His words dwindled to silence, and he scowled at the red light flickering through the blackened isinglass in the stove door. The embroidery hoop sank to the girl's lap, and for a time neither spoke. Bart was about to break the silence with something encouraging when he saw a large crystal tear fall from Peggy's cheek. He was beside her in a moment, a hand upon the folded ones which lay upon the needlework.

"Peg, *dear,*" he said in distress, "I'm terribly sorry. This means a lot to me too. I don't know how I ever should have made a start without your faith in me. Believe me, I mean that, Peg. You've been a trump. And I swear to you, Peggy—I swear it—I'll look round just as soon as I reach New York, see how the land lies, and find you a job. I'll tackle Gill; I'll talk to him. Crosby must employ lots of girls. All periodicals have subscription departments, and there's always room for one more girl. I'll do my level best. In six months, by next fall at any rate, I'll be writing to you to come on, and I'll be meeting you at the Grand Central Station to give you a gorgeous welcome . . . ."

He stopped. Peggy raised her swimming eyes, her chin quivered a little, and Bart saw—saw straight into her soul. For a moment, the revelation took his breath away, and then instinctively, in sympathy, he put his arms about her, and, like Pudgie years before, she came unhesitatingly into his embrace. The touch of her electrified him. He had a second's glimpse of her wide, round, glistening brown eyes, her half-parted lips close to his, before he pressed his mouth to hers. It was a long kiss, while her soft young breast rose against his own, and the blood beat up into his temples. Then he put her from him, burying his face in his hands, pressing his eyeballs in pain, while an avalanche of emotions poured through him. Thoughts—memories—pricks of conscience—love—hunger—passion!

"Merciful Christ," he breathed through his shut hands.

He stood up after a time facing her, abject words of repentance on his lips, but the brown eyes lifted in concern to his had no reproach in them. They held only love, radiant love, trusting, hopeful, and ardent. He fell on his knees before her, drinking deep of her look, words pressing against his lips. The struggle to speak passed after a while; he was content to feast his eyes, filling his soul with the glory of what he saw, holding her soft hands in his, while his own tears sprang to blind him, and he realized the miracle of love had come to him, and that in this girl-child he had found the woman of all women, that here, giving him back look for look, believing in him confidently, was the companion of his destiny.

§ 7

Days of doubt, days of perplexity and groping, nights debating, probing, weighing consequences, hours of fervent prayer, when he knelt beside her in the little church at Carterville, baring his soul to his Maker, imploring the Virgin's intercession, begging hard for guidance and for worthiness. Walking home with her in the cold, clear mornings after early Mass, her tumbling chatter in his ears, her happy, radiant smile and her dark eyes shining in his face, her dancing, eager step failing utterly to keep pace with his own, he could not believe he was doing wrong in marrying her, he dared not even contemplate what it would mean to silence that joyous laughter, to still that high-beating heart, by telling her she could not share with him his hopes and plans.

For he knew he had come to love Peggy, to love her with a fervency only comparable to her own. The thought of her—her sweetness, youth, purity, her utter delectableness—belonging someday to him would bring his heart knocking into his throat. He learned the depth and height of humility. . . . . Unworthy, unworthy, unworthy, he kept repeating to himself.

He went to Jack the second day after the night of revelation and told him what had occurred.

"I don't know what to do," he said; "I want to do what's right, that's all. I want to go through with this thing, if it's fair to Peggy. In the past forty-eight hours something terrific has happened to me. Just finding out she cared for me has made me know for the first time what true love really is. I haven't a savory past. I've been singed and burnt and disillusioned. I've been married once, I've had a mistress. It's a record no one could feel proud of. But it's past—over and done with. I'm a different man to-day. I'm nearly thirty, and I ought to know my own mind by this time. I'm sure I love Peggy better than I'll love any other woman as long as I live; certainly I love her better than any other woman I've ever known.

"I must do one of two things: get out and never see her again, or try to forget the past and make her the best husband I can . . . .

"I tell you, Jack—" Bart said, with a sudden break in his voice—"I don't think I could do the first."

His brother's hand was upon his shoulder.

"I don't know how Jane will feel," Jack said gravely, "but I know I'd be damned well pleased."

Bart gripped him. For a few moments he was unable to speak. When he found his voice, he said huskily:

"I thought I'd slip up to San Francisco to-morrow and have a talk with Father Francis and the doctor. They're the ones who'd know what's best for me to do, and if either of them thinks I oughtn't to marry Peg, I'll beat it to New York, and it will be up to you to stand by and break the news."

CHAPTER IV

§ 1

At an early hour of a glorious morning the last of April, Bart and Peggy were being married at the Cathedral in San Francisco by Father Francis Carter.

Bart lifted his eyes to the great altar before him, adorned with gleaming candles and white lilac, and prayed fervently. Peggy, in a dark blue tailor suit and a blue spring hat, knelt beside him, and upon the raised steps of the altar which rose so white and glorious before him, his brother, clad in cassock, surplice, and stole, moved and made obeisance, now no longer the man Bart knew and loved so well, but wholly the ecclesiastic, priest of the Church, representing Almighty God. Sanctity and high resolve flooded Bart's soul.

At that hour, except for the handful of relatives in the front pews, an attendant or two, and a few early worshipers scattered here and there, the great edifice was deserted. Toward the back of the church, near the entrances could be faintly heard, now and then, the squeak of tiptoeing feet; above the great organ the rose window was gloriously illuminated by the rising sun; an early morning freshness mingled with the smell of stale incense, flowers, and flickering wax candles pervaded the place.

The front pews were occupied by a dozen persons: Jack and Jane first, with Josephine and Tilly, and behind these, Doctor Dan and Louise. Trudie, with her husband and two small boys, sat on the other side of the aisle. Porter Farnsworth and Aunt Gertrude with their daughters, Ada and Dora, now grown women over twenty, occupied the pew directly in the rear.

They were all looking at him, thought Bart, studying his back as he knelt, wondering no doubt what kind of a man he really was, and whether or not he would make Peggy a good husband. He lifted his eyes to the white tabernacle before him, and prayed earnestly he might prove worthy of the purity, goodness, and sweetness of the girl who was promising to be his wife.

§ 2

It was over before he realized it. The group in the front pews swarmed out to meet them as he led Peggy from the altar, crowding around, kissing, shaking hands, beaming good wishes. The voices rose in a babble; the empty church echoed.

"*Dar*ling!"

"Fine work, old boy."

"Dearest Bart, the *best* of luck."

"Careful, Dan, you're mashing her bouquet!"

"My dears . . . . kiss your old Tilly . . . ."

"Doubly your sister now, Bart."

"This is my husband, Bart; you've never met him. And my two boys. . . . . Leo, take your finger out of your mouth!"

A young man with a strong, thin Irish face, in whom Bart identified Jerome McGillicuddy, gave him a warm handclasp, and two pairs of brown eyes, in the round, brown faces of his twin sons, stared up at him.

"Bart! Father Francis is waiting for you in the sacristy . . . ."

"Hello, Aunt Gertrude, how nice . . . ."

"It *was* pretty early to get up, but I had to come . . . . And here's Ada and Dora . . . ."

"Gracious, they've grown up! Peggy, would you know them? Why, it's ten years . . . . Oh, hello, Uncle Porter!"

"Well-well, my boy, glad to see you getting so fine a girl."

"Thanks awfully; I'm glad to see myself getting her. Where's Felix? Couldn't he come?"

The smile on the man's face faded.

"Felix hasn't been very well. He's getting better, though; just at present he's down in a sanitarium at Belmont."

"Too bad; I'm sorry. Give him my best . . . ."

"You must hurry, my boy; you've got a train to catch . . . ."

Jack dragged Bart away. The little room in which Father Francis was waiting seemed jammed with people, too. Bart seized the priest's hand in both of his, squeezed it, and in a steady gaze looked the affection, gratitude, and devotion he felt.

Father Francis patted him on the shoulder, smiling with understanding. Someone handed Bart a pen; he signed; Peggy did likewise.

"Come on, everybody; breakfast at the Palace; we'll all meet there as soon as we can. It's almost eight o'clock now; the Overland leaves at nine." Jane's brisk managerial voice.

Six of the guests crowded into Doctor Dan's automobile and sped to the downtown hotel.

"You have the trunk checks, Jack?"

"Yes. Your tickets, everything is right here in this envelope. I'll give it to you just before you get on the train."

"And the suitcases?"

"Don't worry. They're all right, checked at the Ferry. 'Member when you drove Jane and me over to Guadalupe and saw us off on the Gilroy stage?"

"Do I!"

"How do you feel, darling?"

"Me? Oh, simply glorious. I'm too excited to talk."

"How's the time?"

"Goodness sakes alive, Bart, you're making me as nervous as a witch! I talked to the head waiter at the Palace myself yesterday, and he promised he'd have a table set for twelve and breakfast all ready at sharp eight o'clock. Do you suppose the Farnsworths were hurt at not being asked? I never thought——"

"Say, what's the matter with Felix?"

"T. B. He's got it bad."

"Same as Charley, hey?"

"Yep. Won't last six months. All those Farnsworth children have rotten constitutions. Dora's next on the list."

"Must have been a tubercular streak on Porter's side. I heard his mother died of it."

"But what do you know about Tilly? Hasn't *she* blossomed out!"

Everyone commented on Tilly's looks. Bart had talked with his sister on several occasions during the recent months, and while he had noted she seemed far less giggly, nervous, and kittenish, and very much more attractive, to-day was the first time he had seen her smartly groomed in town attire. In her gray dress, her gray cape, and gray plumed hat, she made a figure that drew not only men's but women's eyes. They were still remarking upon the change in her as they reached the hotel.

"You know the reason," Dan said to Bart, as they followed the others inside; "she's going to have a baby."

"Really? Tilly?"

"Yep. Pregnancy does a lot for nervously high-strung women of Tilly's type."

"She's certainly improved."

"I reckon you and Peggy will be having your own troubles this time next year."

"Oh, no," Bart said with a definite head shake; "Peg and I have a large problem on our hands. New York's no easy place to live in, and I want to get a real start in my work first. No kids for a while, if it's all the same to you." He grinned, and Dan made an expressive gesture with his hands.

The others, who had come down in various conveyances, joined them at this moment, and Bart was struck afresh with Tilly's new comeliness and composure. She had acquired a maternal dignity and reminded him strongly of their mother.

The wedding party had the big Court dining room to themselves, but the emptiness of the place was subduing. After the grapefruit, everyone began buttering rolls, though Bart had no desire to eat; his mind was upon the passing time, and he was still conscious of the emotion he had experienced during the earlier hour at the Cathedral.

"It's a pity we have to hurry this way," Jane said in an annoyed tone.

It *was* a pity, Bart thought. Such an elaborate breakfast, and so many people to serve in so short a space of time, struck him as a foolish undertaking. It was obvious it was going to be impossible to take care of all their needs in thirty minutes, and he was determined to be on his way by the half hour.

"There's plenty of time," Jane assured everybody; "Jack, see if you can hurry them up."

"Let's not get nervous," her husband urged.

Bart caught Peggy's concerned glance and realized he was frowning. His face broke sunny at once, and he touched her hand. How he loved this new wife of his!

Everyone was talking. Trudie had captured cereal for the twins, and as she was sugaring and creaming it for them, an argument was in progress between herself and her husband regarding some matter of discipline. Louise was discussing houses with Tilly who was in the throes of building her own; Josephine, beautiful of skin and hair, looking intellectual behind her rimless pince-nez, was urging special advice upon the bride, who sat next to her; Jack, across the table, explained to Dan why it had been impossible for Father Francis to join them, and Jane waved and tried to catch the head waiter's attention. Bart nervously consulted his watch.

It was twenty minutes to nine, and only half of the meal had appeared. So far, there had been no coffee for anyone. Bart declined to delay longer, and Jane reluctantly agreed that he and Peggy had better start. The others might stay and have breakfast at their leisure; Dan would settle for it later with Jack, who was to go along with Jane and see the bride and groom safely aboard their train. There were more hand-shakings, good-byes and "good lucks"—scraping of chairs, waiters looking on, hats, coats—Peggy's bridal bouquet to be rescued—a final scurry, and six minutes before the boat left, four of them were flying down Market Street in a taxicab, Bart and Jack alternately craning a neck to see the ferry clock.

They made it. The two men ran for the hand luggage while Jane bought tickets for herself and Jack. There was a fluttering of other tickets, green ones, at the gate, which the guard examined and punched with infuriating leisureliness, and finally, out of breath but drawing deep ones of relief, burdened with bags and coats, the four sank gratefully upon the first vacant seats aboard the boat.

Presently they sought the restaurant and enjoyed large plates of "ham an' " with thick mugs of fragrant hot coffee, and after that everyone felt better. But there was nothing for them to say to one another; the sisters linked arms and sat close together; Jack offered Bart a cigarette, and Bart offered one to Jack. Every phase of the adventure had been discussed and rediscussed by them all. Bart had two hundred dollars in crackling greenbacks safely stowed in a wallet within the breast pocket of his coat. It would be enough for a while, and after that, if he didn't land a job, well . . . . Peggy could come back to Los Robles, and he'd rough it alone. All had agreed to this, but

Peggy and Bart were sure nothing like it would happen. They were wholly confident; New York was a city to be conquered that was all—and conquer it they would.

"Oh, we'll get a cute little apartment somewhere—maybe a couple of rooms—and I'll cook——"

"That's one thing you can be grateful for, Mr. Bartholomew Carter: your wife can cook!"

"I can think of one or two other things too."

"If you get into trouble, you know where to come. 'S long as I've got something in the bank, it's yours. I still think it was doggone foolish of you to return that two hundred——"

"Oh, goodness, Jack, let's not go into that again! *Please,* old boy. . . . . Here we are! I never can understand why these boats don't smash the piers to pieces. . . . . Give me that typewriter, Jane; Jack, you take the hat box . . . ."

A few minutes later, the Pullman porter was relieving them of their luggage beside the steps of their car.

"Oh, *Janey!* A drawing room! . . . . Jack! How wonderful of you!"

"Say, old man, this is white——"

"Jane's idea——"

"My dear, it was just a little good-bye present——"

"As if you hadn't done enough already——"

"Candy, and books! *And* flowers! I wonder who . . . . How perfectly beautiful! *Orchids!* 'Mr. Jerome McGillicuddy.' Wasn't that dear of him? . . . . And, oh, Janey, look at the little lights we have to read by—and an electric fan all our own! It's *palatial!* . . . . Oh, Bart, Bart, I'm so happy, I think I'll just die!" and Peggy flung her arms about her husband and kissed him on his cheeks, his nose, his lips.

"Darling . . . ." he protested, but her sweetness, her youth, her childish excitement, and her utter adorableness made his heart strain toward her.

"Now, listen here, my boy. Cut out that love-making for just a minute. Here are your checks, your *trunk* checks; there was sixteen dollars and something excess baggage, but I paid it, so your trunks are all clear. Don't let 'em collect for 'em at that end, that's all. Now, here are your tickets. I reckon the conductor will come along and pick 'em up as soon as you get started. But now, for heaven's sake, don't lose 'em."

Jane was sitting close to Peggy, her arm about her waist; there were tears in her eyes, and she was saying in a shaking whisper:

"Little sister . . . ."

"Now, if you get kind of worried when you get down to the last bill or two, all you got to do is to wire——"

"I sha'n't have to touch you——"

"Well, if you *should.*"

"I *won't.*"

"And give that rascally twin brother of mine a good call-down for not writing——"

"He'll meet us at the Grand Central; at least, I hope he will. I wired him."

"All . . . . A—B-O-A-R-D!"

"Oh, my God, there we go!"

"My dear——"

"Bye-bye, old boy——"

"So long——"

"You'll write?"

"To-day!"

"G-God bless you!"

"Don't, Janey. Remember I'm happy—oh, *so* happy!"

"I'll miss you——"

"Well, my dear, what do you think——"

"Com'on, girl; this train'll be moving in a second."

"Good-bye."

"Good-bye."

"Good . . . ."

§ 3

On the gigantic *Solano,* the train had crossed Carquinez Strait and was speeding over the tule lands toward Sacramento. Peggy had put her blue hat in a paper bag, her blue jacket and her rough tweed coat with the fur collar on hangers, her bridal bouquet in the metal basin of the wash room, her orchids in the drinking tumbler, had arranged books, magazines, and candy, and now sat at the window, her elbow on its ledge, following the scenery with her eyes, commenting in an endless stream on everything she saw. Bart experimented with the luggage, stowing it in different places, trying various arrangements, mentally damning the bulky hat box. Satisfied at length, he seated himself opposite to his wife and let his eyes rest contentedly upon her. She was beautiful, he thought, and had borne herself with dignity and self-possession during the wedding, the trying breakfast at the Palace, and the ordeal of saying good-bye. Of the two sisters, it had been Peggy who had been resolute, sure of herself, confident of the future. Hers was an indomitable nature; she was afraid of nothing; her faith was measureless. So young, so tender, so guileless, so sweet and good. He put out his hand and touched her knee, and, as she turned, her eyes grew large and dark and soft.

Taking the seat beside her, his fingers interlocked with hers; she nestled against him, her head upon his shoulder, and the girlish chitter-chatter was hushed. Together they looked out at the flying panorama, conscious of little they saw, thinking and feeling each other's nearness and dearness.

"It's the great adventure," Bart said at length, upon a breath.

She made no reply.

"The great adventure," he repeated. She nestled closer, squeezing his hand. The train thundered across culverts, screamed at crossings, and fled onward over the marshes.

"You're not afraid?" Bart asked. He had to wait for her answer.

"Why should I be?" Her soft childish voice never failed to stir him. "I have you," she finished simply.

"I may be a failure," he said.

She shook her head, "You won't. I know it."

"I may not be able to land a job."

"You will."

"Perhaps my salary won't be large enough for us to live on."

"It will have to be."

"We may not find an apartment we can afford."

"We're bound to."

"And I may never write a line that will electrify the world!"

"I'm certain you will."

His joyous laugh rang out; he loved her spirit and hugged her arm.

"You muggins!" he said fondly.

She straightened herself, turning to face him, her large eyes studying him soberly.

"Bart," she began, a faint frown marking her brow.

"My darling?"

"I want you to tell me something?"

"Anything, sweetheart."

"Honest and truly?"

"Honest and truly."

"Cross your heart?"

"Cross my heart."

She regarded him firmly before putting her question, her expression serious, her mouth pinched together.

"Do you love me?"

At his "Ah-h" of assurance, she flung herself upon him, her arms about his neck, her face buried against his breast. He caught her, raising her head, and kissed her.

"My husband," she said softly. She drew back to study him again, holding him from her as her eyes traveled over his face. "My own—my very own," she said.

He pulled her to him, kissing her tenderly.

"You know," she said, freeing herself once more, "you know, sometimes I wake up in the night and I think it's all a dream—your coming to care for me; I think I've imagined it all. Bart, I've loved you ever since that night I drove you home from Guadalupe and you told me all the grand things you'd done in the city, and all the wonderful things you intended to do, and I believed every word of it, and now I believe you're going to be even more wonderful than you ever thought you'd be! But sometimes it doesn't seem possible you can care the snap of your fingers about me. I can't believe it's I—that's all—that it's Peggy Carter, Jo's and Jane's little baby sister, whom you've chosen to make your wife, for we *are* married now, aren't we, Bart? We're married for keeps, and you belong to me; you're my own, my very, very own, and nothing in the world will ever make you anything less, because you may learn to hate and despise me, Bart, but you'll always be my husband, and I'll never let you go even if you beat me or rob a bank!"

He stopped her flood with his lips, and as he held her close, his arms about her, he repeated to himself what she had just said: that she was his, she belonged to him, and he would live his life in serving her, protecting her, and loving her, and that nothing in the world should ever take her from him. Fresh, rosy and sweet she was, like some fragrant bloom, soft, luscious, and round like ripe fruit—and she was *his* wife.

"God punish me," he prayed, his eyes closed, his cheek against her hair, "if I ever hurt this child, if I ever prove unworthy of her trust!"

§ 4

His mind dwelt more and more upon the approaching night, eagerness and love, respect for her innocence contending in his thoughts. Of how much she knew, what she expected or did not expect, he had no notion. He watched for a look in her eyes—self-consciousness, fear of him, fear of the unknown. She betrayed nothing. All through the long afternoon, as the train climbed and climbed into the mountains, she was gay and garrulous. She exulted over fleeting glimpses of sheer canyons and craggy peaks through breaks in the snow sheds, and cried aloud and clapped her hands when she caught sight of a patch of actual snow high up on a crest. The luxury and conveniences on the train drew happy exclamations from her at each fresh discovery. Everything was wonderful; everything delighted her; she was carried from one excitement to another. Not once did he detect nervous anticipation or find her looking at him with questioning, doubtful eyes. Even when it came time to make ready for dinner in the dining car, and it was necessary partially to disrobe and take turns in the tiny lavatory, did she appear in any way perturbed.

Bart was puzzled. He had looked for a time of gravity, of trepidation as the afternoon wore on to reassure her and settle her fears. He had thought to make no marital advances toward her until they reached New York; in any case, to be content to let circumstances decide the matter.

He was eager to possess her, but he would not permit his mind to dwell upon that ecstasy. He loved her too much to think about her in that way, and yet he appreciated that this girl who warmly returned his love and wanted him for a husband would not wish him not to desire her. He was aware, too, that this budding rose, whom he had married, was a passionate little person. She had quivered and trembled in his arms, clung with her lips hungrily to his, turned hot and cold, straining him to her on many an occasion during their engagement days. Perhaps she did not know what stirred her, but it was all the more reason, he reminded himself now, why she should be treated with the utmost consideration.

Child of love and simple faith! He idolized her!

They dined hilariously in the dining car, consulting each other about what to eat, making mental notes of the prices.

"I think I'll just have some tea and toast and tomato salad," Peggy announced.

"You'll have nothing of the kind. You'll have a broiler and some green peas and a dessert. You can have the tea and toast too, if you like."

"Oh, I couldn't, sweetheart; I just simply couldn't. I'm not in the least hungry."

"You may be later on." Leaning across their table and whispering earnestly: "Darling, I've got plenty of money; you mustn't let what things cost influence you. That's what this is for," and he tapped his breast pocket.

"Couldn't we divide a dish?" she asked, hesitating.

He frowned and shook a positive head.

They debated so long over what to have, he began to feel uncomfortably about the waiter.

"You look so adorable in that blue hat," he told her, when at last their order was in hand.

"Do I?" Her eyes grew warm, and with the tip of a finger on her lips she sent him a kiss.

"I suppose we're like all the newlyweds that ever were," she said. "Do you suppose anybody suspects us? I don't believe anybody would take us for bride and groom, and I don't care if they did. I only hope most brides are as happy as I am, because I'm simply radiantly happy!"

"You're wonderful," he said, drinking of her eyes.

"I adore you," she whispered back.

He thought nervously about the night.

§ 5

They played Poker Patience in their drawing room until after nine, and then Peggy's yawns brought the fact home to him that they had both been up since six that morning, and it had been a long, fatiguing day.

"Well, my dear, how about calling it a bet and turning in?" he asked casually.

"Fine." Her mouth opened in a dislocating gape, and she gathered up the cards.

"Will you ring?"

"Ring?"

"Yes, for the porter. Press that little button there just under the mirror. I'll go forward to the smoking car for a puff, and you can step out and sit in one of the unmade-up sections, or go back to the observation car, until he's finished. . . . . I'll give you plenty of time to get to bed," he enunciated carefully.

The porter knocked and peered in upon them.

"Will you make us up, when you have time?" Bart said to him, edging himself to his feet from between the seat and the table.

"Yas, sir; youse next. . . . . How you like 'em?" The darkey cocked his head as if to listen, averting his face.

"Like 'em?" Bart repeated, puzzled.

"Yas, sir. You just want the lower, or top and bottom?"

It took Bart a moment to understand his meaning; then the blood surged to his temples. This situation he had not foreseen. His mouth opened and shut, a meaningless sound escaped him, and then in a rush, he blurted out:

"Top and bottom, I guess," and fled to the club car.

§ 6

It was more than an hour before he could bring himself to the point of returning. He considered taking a highball to bolster his nerve, but he feared the odor of whisky on his breath might trouble Peggy, or at least make her wonder the reason for it.

"Come on, now, don't be a fool," he said, getting to his feet and starting in the direction of his car. "You're behaving like a schoolboy, not like a man who's been married before and knows something of life. You're an old rounder if it comes to that, a regular rake, and it behooves you to remember it and try to act like one."

Yet he hesitated again just outside the door of their room, a finger poised a moment above the push button that sounded the announcer.

Peggy was in the lower berth. He caught a glimpse of her soft brown, braided hair, her wide-open dark eyes, the pink and lace of her night dress over her white neck, her lovely hands and arms lying upon the coarse Pullman sheet. His glance immediately roved about the cluttered and crowded little room, pretending a survey, while he divested himself of his coat and waistcoat, to hang them carefully upon a wire hanger. In the seclusion of the lavatory, he finished his disrobing and donned his new pajamas. Behind its protecting door, alone with himself, he studied his reflection in the mirror, rubbed his chin, nervously removed the orchids from the glass tumbler to fill it and wet his lips with ice water, brushed his hair carefully for the fourth time, and taking a deep breath, stepped out into view.

"Well, my dear, let's pop this out," he said, carefully avoiding Peggy's eyes, and switching out the ceiling lights. He inspected the electric fan.

"Don't think we'll need this." He turned it on; experimented with it; turned it off. Next he manipulated the lever that controlled the heat, working it back and forth, and closed it.

"Well," he said.

Lamps in the corners of the upper berth still were lit, and one just above Peggy's head in the lower one, illuminated her lovely childish face. He rested his hand upon the shelf of the upper berth, prepared to mount; he caught her eye and smiled.

"Good-night, darling."

Sinking to the side of her bed, he leaned forward to kiss her. She raised her lips to his; they trembled against his own. He drew away, swallowing, one hand upon his throat. Their gaze did not falter.

"Good-night," he said huskily, and bent over for another kiss.

Her arms went around his neck, she drew down his head, meeting his lips. He caught her to him then, and passion flared up in white flame, love and longing drawing them together.

CHAPTER V

§ 1

New York in welcoming guise, New York in smiling mood, New York in gayest dress.

Gill met them at the station, a man of thirty-five, lantern-jawed, hollow-cheeked, beetle-browed, nervous, brusque, thoroughly metropolitan. He awed Bart by his speech and assertive manner.

"Well-well-well, Mr. Man, here you are. Hello, Peggy; my, but you've grown pretty! How's everybody back home? We'll have to get together and have a long pow-wow."

He was not unfriendly; he was troubled and in a hurry.

Guiding the two through the crowd, he led them to a spot a little apart, where they could talk.

"Now, listen here: I'm in a fix. My wife's having a baby. They took her to Sloane's yesterday, but there's nothing doing yet. Maybe any minute. I wanted to look after you when you got here, but you see how it is. Must dash right back to the hospital, but I'll try to see you to-night or to-morrow. Now, tell me," he turned to Bart, his brows knitting, "you wrote you expected to live here? 'Zat right? Got a job?"

"No, not yet."

"Well, gee whiskers. What're you going to do?"

"Write; work on a newspaper or magazine. I want to be a reporter." Bart saw he would receive no encouragement here; Gill must not be thinking he expected it.

The sharp eyes bored into him.

"How you going about it?"

"Oh, I have plenty of contacts."

The other rubbed his chin, frowning.

"All the magazines have been accepting my stuff," Bart continued. "I've sold stories to *Crosby's*, the *Post*, *Century*, *Harper's*, some of the others. The *Times* ran all my fire-and-earthquake articles—front-paged 'em, you know. They wrote me to come on and have a talk with them."

"Oh." Gill was impressed, relieved. His face brightened.

"That's fine; that's bully," he said. "Now, listen here, Mr. Man: I can't pilot you folks about the way I'd like, but I've engaged a room for you over at the Park Avenue Hotel. Didn't know how you were fixed, of course, so I reserved you something fairly reasonable. Cost you about six dollars a day. The Park Avenue is an old-fashioned dump, but it's good, has class. You'll like it there, I'm sure. Have your trunks sent over, and I'll look you up as soon as I can. This baby—my, it's all happened at the wrong time!—has complicated everything. Don't let any transportation company handle your trunks; give your checks to the hotel porter. He'll get your baggage for you; least trouble to yourselves. You'll find a taxi right outside the station. I'll call you up later in the day. 'S long, and don't let 'em sell you any gold bricks."

With a wave of his hand, he hurried away in the crowd.

Bart looked at Peggy and Peggy looked in return. Bart made a grimace.

"We won't concern ourselves too much about Mr. Henry Aloysius Carter. However, we'll take his tip and try his hotel, and then perhaps to-day or to-morrow we'll find a cheaper place of our own."

He signaled to the porter waiting patiently beside their luggage.

"Taxi, please."

§ 2

The Park Avenue, a rambling barracks of a hotel with a large glass-roofed court, reminded them of the Palace in San Francisco. It seemed friendly and homelike.

"Just think, Peg, we were having breakfast at the Palace four days ago." Bart had the pages of the *Herald* spread out upon the bed and was studying the theatrical advertisements.

"Goodness," Peggy said, her nose against the window pane. "It seems just too wonderful to be here in my dear old, darling New York, because while I always vowed I'd get here, I never thought I actually would because——

"Say, Bart, what's that funny-looking building over there that looks like a fort?"

They ventured to the streets, trying to look inconspicuous, hesitating to ask questions. They discovered Fifth Avenue, Broadway, the Metropolitan Opera House, and Times Square.

"Gee," thought Bart, gazing up, awed and marveling at the tall, triangular-shaped building that gave its name to the intersection, "that's the paper that ran my fire-and-earthquake articles!"

That Saturday and Sunday, they roamed the city, traveled on bus tops, visited Central Park, penetrated the portals of the renowned Waldorf-Astoria, sat for a few thrilling minutes in far-famed Peacock Alley, lunched fearsomely and frugally at the Café Martin, occupied gallery seats for *The Midnight Sons,* said to one another over and over that there never in the world was such a show, attended "High" at St. Patrick's on Sunday, trod the pavements of Fifth Avenue with beating hearts, and drank deep of the air of Broadway as if it were elixir upon a mountain top.

There began to prey on Bart's mind a growing fear that New York was too big for them, too colossal, too terrific; it took influence to break in here. It wasn't like 'Frisco. Poignantly there came back to him his first days with Pudgie in that city: dishwashing at the Athens' Grill on Third Street! He realized more and more he had relied too much on Jonathan Crosby's slight show of interest.

Peggy, buoyant, chirping, delighted with everything, believing firmly in the future, reproached him for his gloom. He dared not confide to her his fears; she would only have pooh-poohed them. He loved her too much to distress or frighten her.

At night, when her head with its soft fragrant braids lay upon his shoulder, a hand curled like a leaf upon his chest, his arm beneath and about her waist—they always slept so—he would stare up into the darkness, thinking, planning, praying, telling himself through wakeful hours that somehow he must crash through, somehow land a job, somehow gain a foothold.

For the first day and a half, his thoughts of Gill were full of resentment. He and Peggy had not been in when he telephoned, but when Gill, in person, captured them on Sunday after their return from church, Bart was forced to admit he was not much changed from the old Gill he remembered as a boy riding herd at Los Robles, or from the eager, ambitious, talkative undergraduate at Berkeley.

Gill was a proud father. A fine, healthy ten-pound girl had arrived late Saturday afternoon, and Alice was now all right, but she had had a terrible time; a great specialist had to be called in. Alice was an amazing girl; she had showed such pluck. They were going to call the baby "Sylvia." . . . .

Gill gave a rapid-fire account of himself. *The Shoe Ægis* was a periodical devoted to shoe manufacturers; it was one of several trade journals published by Jeffry B. Dawson, and Alice was old man Dawson's only daughter—a perfectly beautiful girl, high-spirited like a race horse, brilliant, talented, who had been a star at Vassar. The Dawson Publishing Company was a big organization, but for the past five or six years, it had been having a hard time. Dawson was an old curmudgeon, with a lot of antiquated ideas about business. He was gradually letting go, and Gill had confidence in the future; they had been cutting down expenses—really, it had been the overhead which had eaten up all the profits—and Gill was mighty glad to hear that Bart had such good connections, because he had been afraid that his brother might have been expecting him to find him a position with the D. P. Co. Had that been the case, there'd've been "nothing doing." The whole trade journal business was in a bad way; too much competition.

Alice should be allowed to go home in a couple of weeks, and as soon as she was strong enough, Gill wanted Bart and Peggy to come down to Port Washington for a visit—a week-end, maybe.

In spite of his incisive, challenging manner, there was something magnetic about Gill. Bart discussed him with his wife after he had gone.

"He's a good guy," he summarized, "and he's bound to land on his feet, but, by jiminy, I'm not going to look to him for any handouts during my present low ebb!"

"What do you mean by 'my present low ebb'?" Peggy demanded. "Why, Bart Carter, you make me positively ill by the way you gloom! You'd think you'd lost a leg or something. Heavenly day! We only arrived Friday, and it was simply out of the question for you to see Mr. Crosby to-day or yesterday!"

"Don't be mad at me," Bart pleaded, drawing her to him to be kissed.

"I ought to be, because you're a bad boy, and because you ought to feel *in your bones* that Mr. Crosby's going to give you a job, or the *Times* take you on, because the way to get a job is to believe beforehand you're going to get it, because 'faith removes mountains' . . . ."

But her confidence did not dispel his worry. As they passed lines of brownstone fronts, he would stare up at their façades, wondering if somewhere under a roof there was a vacant room or two. What were rents in New York? Would it be easier and cheaper for them to find a boarding house? In any case, they must move.

Gill had suggested Washington Square as a locality in which they might find suitable accommodation, so Bart and Peggy spent Sunday afternoon investigating that neighborhood. They found nothing which might even remotely do for them. Bart became more discouraged and began to find his wife's persistent optimism somewhat irritating.

On their way back to the hotel, they sought out the address of *Crosby's Magazine* on Fifth Avenue. Large gold fat letters, high up on the sixth story of a plain granite building, whose ground floor was occupied by a famous haberdasher, identified its offices. Bart stood on the opposite side of the street, gazing up at blank windows, and his spirits sank lower still. Sunday afternoon in the business section of the Avenue, the great thoroughfare was comparatively deserted. An occasional pedestrian or couple in Sunday finery hurried past, a limousine rolled by, half-filled busses careened and lumbered on their courses, an empty hansom briskly clop-clopped toward them, its cabby invitingly flourishing a whip; window boxes of hotels and clubs bloomed with gay tulips, an early florid awning or two gave warning of approaching hot weather. The silent vacant office buildings stared blankly at one another with shuttered windows and padlocked grilled doorways. The street was solemn, empty, forbidding. Bart turned away with a quick breath.

"Come on, let's go to the hotel and have a cocktail. May cheer us up. If Crosby doesn't take me on, guess we'd better hit the trail back to Los Robles."

§ 3

That evening Peggy put on her prettiest dinner frock, and Bart struggled into his unfamiliar tuxedo. At the same table, where an hour or two before they had had their drinks, they dined luxuriously, and much too extravagantly, for, by what seemed to them a silly ruling of the hotel, the dollar-and-a-half table d'hôte could not be served in the court. Bart declined to move to the hot, smoky inside rooms, where it might be had, and—the apologetic head waiter standing by—shook his head crossly at his wife when she begged him to change. It was their first tiff, soon over, and the joy of reconciliation made the trivial disagreement almost worth while, so Bart said afterwards. The cost of the meal ran close to seven dollars, and the tip made it eight, more than twice what they had planned to spend, but the lights and orchestra, the gay, noisy, happy throng about them, the feeling it was spring and that they were together in their beloved New York, justified the extra money they decided, many times over.

"Isn't it marvelous?" Bart asked, his elbows on the table.

"Marvelous," she returned, her look intent on his, dark brown eyes glowing.

"Do you love me?"

"Ah-h, you know I do."

"I worship you."

"You should only worship God."

"Then you *and* God."

"That's sacrilegious."

"Can't help it. I *worship* you."

"Silly . . . ."

"Oh, well, you don't know . . . ."

"I do too."

"What?"

"How it feels to worship somebody."

"You mean me?"

"No, the soda-water boy at Fuller's Candy Parlor!"

"You muggins! I adore you . . . ."

The orchestra departed, the great court restaurant emptied. In the bumping, slowly ascending elevator which carried them up to their bedroom floor as they were pushed back into a corner by other passengers, their hands found one another's, fingers linking.

§ 4

Jonathan Crosby was a charming, pleasant-mannered gentleman with silky white hair, a silky white mustache, a ruddy, youthful face with a quaint dimple in either cheek, and shrewd, blue restless eyes. To Bart, he was agreeably cordial.

"Sit down, Mr. Carter. We've corresponded a bit; that quicksilver-mine story of yours was quite a corker. You're here from California? In just what part of California is Carterville? I think you wrote me it took its name from your parents. How'd that happen?"

Bart was nervous. He wet his lips and tried to talk but—as he described the interview later to Peggy—he "couldn't get going." The room was lined to the ceiling with books, the editor sat at a flat-topped desk, piled high with manuscripts, correspondence, papers. Idly twisting a letter opener in his hands, his restless gaze shifted from quick glances at his caller's face to the gray windows which gave upon a colorless sky and the roofs of tall office buildings. The noise of traffic below, absent yesterday, now rose in a roar, while just outside of Crosby's office there was a hum of activity. Bart could hear rapid feet sounding in the hall, men's voices, the incessant summons of telephone bells, the click of typewriters, the slamming of doors. He felt hurried, his opportunity slipping, Crosby's attention waning.

"I've got to get a job," he suddenly blurted out. "I've come all the way from California, Mr. Crosby, to ask you to give me one."

The dam which had held back all he wanted to say burst at last, a gush of words poured from him, and he talked without pausing for several minutes, ending with:

"—and I've got a wife—I was married last Tuesday—I've less than a hundred dollars in the world and"—repeating himself—"I've got to have a job."

Crosby shot him one of his furtive glances, the waving letter opener was stilled for a moment.

"What kind of a job?"

"*Any* kind of a job, I don't care; writing ads, copy, tying up magazines, addressing, filing, running errands—anything you can give me to do."

The notion of asking for a part-time position in order to write at home evaporated as if he had never entertained it. What he wanted now was employment, employment which would pay for his and Peggy's food and pay their rent, employment which would let them live in New York, justify her faith in him, permit him to go back to tell her—*shout* to her: "I've got a job—I've got a job!"

Suddenly he was fighting, fighting with Crosby's mind and will, fighting to make the man engage him.

The editor listened. The pleasant smile disappeared. His eyes went to Bart, went to the window, went back to Bart. He pursed his lips, tapped them with the tip of the letter opener, and at every silence Bart renewed his arguments. All the time, he was thinking of Peggy, of running back to her, up the stairs, no time to wait for the bumping elevator, bursting into their hotel room, crying: "I've got a job—I've got a job!"

At last he realized he had said all that was needed. He shut his lips and waited for Crosby to speak. The man's eyes continued to flicker—at him, at the window, the metal letter opener tapping his lips.

"Know anything about make-up?"

"I can learn."

"Anything about engraving?"

"No, sir."

"Type?"

Bart shook his head.

The editor's lips took on their pout once more, the metal opener resuming its gentle tapping. Bart looked for his hat. Crosby was waiting for him to go. Perhaps he would fare better at the *Times*.

"Married, hey." It was not a question.

"Yes, sir; last week."

Bart wanted to snatch the letter opener from the man's hand and hurl it on the floor. Why keep him in such suspense?

"What do you think you can live on?"

HOPE—bubbling, bursting, surging HOPE!

"On what you can afford to pay me."

"That's just it. If I take you and give you and your wife enough to live on, I'll be paying you twice what you're worth."

"I see," Bart said dryly. "I'll work," he urged.

"I'll expect you to," Crosby took him up; "but you'll have to be taught *how* to work, and that will take somebody's time."

"I see," Bart repeated.

Window staring again, the letter opener, but hope was burning brightly; Bart's knee began to twitch.

"The situation is this," Crosby said at last, "I have a young lady on my staff, Miss Mildred Bransom, whom I'm sending to Russia next week to investigate certain conditions there which might be the subject for an important series of articles she will write for us. She'll be gone three or four months; while she's away, we'll be short-handed."

Again the eyes to the dusty window, and the tap, tap of the bright steel implement.

"Could you live on twenty-five a week?"

Bart's mind leaped to the hundred a month the railroad had paid him, wholly inadequate even for his *un*married needs.

"Certainly," he said.

"It will be a long time before you get more . . . ."

"I understand." (Oh, he was going to be able to shout: "I've got a job—I've got a job!")

"You may work out here, you may not, but if you like us, and we you, remember—I want to make this clear—it will be a year, perhaps more, before you can expect a raise. That's understood?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, when do you want to start in?"

"To-morrow." (Peggy and he would have to find some cheaper lodgings that very afternoon—and he'd have to write in the evenings—oh, every night! More money that way.)

"You might meet some of our staff now." Crosby rose.

"May I shake your hand, sir? I can't tell you how grateful I am."

"We'll see how it works out; I hope you'll fit in."

He led Bart into a number of small, dusty, glass-partitioned offices in turn.

"Mr. Biddle—Mr. Carter. We've just taken Mr. Carter on to help out. Mr. Biddle edits some of our departments.

"Mr. Oddie, this is a new addition to our staff. Mr. Oddie attends to our circulation."

There were others.

"Mr. MacKenzie—Mr. Carter. We're all very much afraid of Mr. MacKenzie. He frowns at us whenever we talk of spending money, and I'm sure I don't know what he's going to say when he hears I've boosted our pay roll.

"This is Mr. Ohrstrom, our managing editor. Mr. Carter, Will; you remember Mr. Carter's stories? I thought I'd take Mr. Carter on while Miss Bransom's away. He's from California and seems anxious to join us. You'll find Ohrstrom a martinet, Carter. He'll be your boss, and Heaven help you if you keep the magazine from going to press on schedule."

Bart grinned, shook hands, tried to say something if only to sound his voice, could think of nothing, laughed at each of Mr. Crosby's witticisms, shook hands again, followed his new employer to another office. Everybody seemed charming, friendly, cordial.

(It would be only a short time now before he'd be able to run back to Peg. He could just see and hear her wild excitement!)

A small office with curtains at the windows, a carpet, easy chairs, pictures on the walls. A woman rose as the men entered.

"This is Miss Bransom," the editor said. "She's the lady who's going to Russia."

Bart met clever eyes in a friendly, intelligent face—a handsome girl with fine yellow hair, clear skin, a smooth column of throat—well groomed, smart, an air of briskness and dispatch about her. She shook hands firmly.

The three seated themselves; Crosby talked. Mr. Carter was again identified as the author of short stories recently accepted; Miss Bransom acknowledged it with a smile and a nod. It was evident she had liked them. The editor explained his plans. Bart was to take over some of Miss Bransom's routine work: he was to send copy to the printer, check proofs, transmit photographs and drawings to the engraver, receive cuts, paste up dummies, prepare clipping sheets, read manuscripts. Miss Bransom would explain the duties as much as possible in the week before she sailed. Mr. Ohrstrom would, of course, supervise the work. For the few days that remained, it might be well to have a desk moved into Miss Bransom's room so that Mr. Carter might be in close touch. He would report in the morning. Mr. Crosby left them to become better acquainted.

And on winged feet half an hour later, Bart went springing back to the hotel, the shout of his announcement trembling in his throat. Peggy came flying to his arms as he burst open the door, but there was no need for words as he clasped her to him, hugging her fiercely, his lips in her hair.

§ 5

A long afternoon of weary, disappointing house hunting.

Twenty-five dollars a week was only a hundred dollars a month.

"And that means, darling," said Peggy practically, "that we can spend at the very outside but one week's salary for rent."

Twenty-five dollars!

On a strip of park, shaped like a very thin wedge of pie, in a dirty Italian section near Washington Square, they found two dark unfurnished rooms where Croton bugs scuttled from out and beneath moldy plumbing—rent twenty a month. Third Avenue offered a tenement with swarming, yelling children, where a vacant four-room apartment might be had for twenty-two. A Jewish family was eager to rent a whole floor above their kosher restaurant for five dollars a week. A boarding house on Madison Avenue with an air of refinement and distinction had a vacant room and bath on the third-floor front, but the quiet, gray-haired landlady explained she would have no difficulty in obtaining the twenty dollars a week she was asking for it, despite the approaching summer.

"Dearest, dearest, *don't* be discouraged," Peggy implored; "this hunting is all part of the fun of getting settled. You'll see! We'll find just the right thing."

They were passing a gray stone church tucked inconspicuously between two larger buildings.

"Do you suppose it's us?" she asked, looking up at its noncommittal exterior. "Come on, we'll find out, and if it is, we'll say a prayer."

It *was* Catholic. The prayer was said, kneeling in a dusky emptiness, the light of the dying day warming the rich stained-glass windows.

The next morning, before Bart had been seated an hour at the ink-stained, pine-topped table which had been placed for him in Miss Bransom's office, that young lady looked up from her work and said:

"Mr. Carter, Mr. Crosby was telling me yesterday afternoon you are just married and that you and your wife are looking for a place to live. Why don't you rent my little apartment? You see, I shan't be back from the other side until September, and I very much want a tenant—a nice one, to keep the place up and look after my things. My quarters would just suit you, I believe. Why not bring your wife out this evening to look at them? I'm on East Seventy-sixth Street."

And as if God had decided to answer bounteously the petition Bart and Peggy had addressed to Him the previous afternoon, as if He were especially guiding their footsteps, Miss Bransom's small suite at the top of a quiet, narrow four-story building appeared to be designed directly for their needs. Miss Bransom paid fifty dollars a month for the place, but she was willing to let Bart and Peggy have it for thirty-five, and while Bart pointed out that even this was more than they had planned to pay, Peggy countered with the argument that it obviated the expense of furnishing. She was in love with the tiny home, she said; she was in love with Miss Bransom herself and told her so.

"Oh, my dear, it's just *too* enchanting."

It was indeed charming. At the back was the bedroom with a sizeable kitchen adjoining equipped with gas stove, ice box, and an "honest-to-goodness" sink. The room was narrow, of fair size, and quaintly but adequately furnished. It had two windows giving upon a clutter of back-yard gardens. There was no connecting passage between these rooms and the front one, except the outer public hall, but as they were on the top floor, it was just as if they all belonged to the one suite, Miss Bransom explained. The walls of the hall were hung with photographs of Venice and the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. The front room, by far the most attractive part of the establishment, was furnished with a settee and chairs which, Miss Bransom explained, had once belonged to King Ludwig of Bavaria. The taste displayed in pictures, curtains, bookshelves and lamps was excellent, and, as Peggy expressed it, it was "all just too good to be true."

"You see, Mrs. Carter, I have my meals in here, though it's a bit far, perhaps, for hot dishes to be carried in through the hall from the kitchen——"

"Why, it's only a dozen steps!" Peggy exclaimed, dismissing the objection.

"—and, of course, the tradespeople come to your front door——"

"There won't be any tradespeople in this family," Peggy declared; "I'm going to do my own marketing and carry provisions home with me."

"You'll find Third Avenue much less expensive than the shops on Lexington."

The two women continued to discuss details, while Bart stood at the window figuring a tentative apportionment of his income on the back of an envelope: thirty-five for rent, fifty for food. That didn't leave much out of a hundred for emergencies, clothes, amusements. He'd have to write in the evenings and write *hard*.

"It's all ready to move into. I've had it cleaned from top to bottom——"

"Everything's immaculate——"

"I didn't think I'd be so lucky in getting such nice tenants. Summer time, you know; it's hard to rent."

"Just imagine what finding a made-to-order home means to us! It's just . . . . well, it's just ducky, that's all."

Bart's eyes moved from one woman's pleased countenance to the other's. He was mentally trying to add. Peggy skipped away to inspect the kitchen.

"Your wife's charming," Miss Bransom said. Bart smiled.

"I hope she's not too optimistic."

"She seems amazingly practical to me."

"She's young . . . . hasn't had much experience." His fond glance went to the door through which she had disappeared.

When it came back to Miss Bransom's face, she was staring at him.

"Forgive me," she said, coloring. "I can't help feeling moved by your courage—yours and your wife's. It seems so marvelous . . . . your starting out together . . . . braving New York this way. Young love, you know, is—is beautiful. It's—I think it's *splendid.*"

"Well," he laughed, embarrassed, "I can't say I regard our venture as particularly courageous. We fell in love, that's all, and there didn't seem anything else for us to do but to come here and try to 'bust in.' "

"You'll forgive me, won't you?" Miss Bransom urged.

Bart laughed again.

"I can't see there's much to forgive. It's mighty nice of you to take an interest in us." She had a pleasant manner, he thought; he was sorry she was going away, and awkwardly attempted to say so.

"It's a big chance for me," she told him. "For a year I've been trying to persuade Mr. Crosby to let me go. I don't know that I can write the articles, but I'm sure I can dig up the stuff; it's all there, and I know how to get the facts. It will take me the whole of three months . . . ."

"I like Mr. Crosby," Bart stated.

"You'll like all our people, I think. Even Mr. MacKenzie, for all his growliness and shouting-at-you, is a corker, generous and warm-hearted."

"I'm going to work hard," Bart said.

"Oh, you'll do that," Miss Bransom predicted. "We all do —*have* to."

"Let's hope you'll find me still in the office when you get back."

"I shall expect to."

"Bart, Bart," Peggy cried, running into the room and, unmindful of their prospective landlady's presence, throwing herself upon her husband, "oh, it has *everything,* darling. It's just *made* for us."

§ 6

"I feel just like Cinderella," Peggy said, some weeks later, curling up on the shallow, brocaded settee which had once borne the royal weight of King Ludwig, and nestling herself into the circle of Bart's arms. "My fairy godmother waved her wand, and everything—*more* than everything—I ever wanted has just tumbled into my lap. My pumpkin has turned into a coach-and-four, and my little dead mice have all become footmen in powdered wigs and liveries——"

"What do you mean by 'your pumpkin' and 'little dead mice'?"

"Oh, well, you know—I was just living along at the ranch, and I didn't have anything to do, and Janey was sort of bossing me——"

"And who bosses you now?"

She raised an arm and drew his head down to her lips.

"You muggins!" Bart protested; "you're mussing all these manuscripts, efforts of struggling young authors who want to land in *Crosby's* and perhaps marry their second cousins."

On the seat of a chair in front of him was a pile of manuscripts which must all be read before he went to bed, a report gem-clipped to each, and the bundle put on Mr. Ohrstrom's desk in the morning. Almost every evening Bart had such a heap to plow through. It was a boring task, for after his long day he was tired and sleepy; at night he wanted to talk and play with his wife.

His work at the office was absorbing, perplexing, and difficult. He was constantly making mistakes, and forgetting to do things. Ohrstrom was impatient, irritated by the absence of Miss Bransom, who had attended, capably and smoothly, to routine duties. Bart felt he was handicapped by his dread of this man's criticism and the fear of losing his job. He hardly ever came into contact with Mr. Crosby, who wandered, perplexed, distracted, in and out of his own office, visiting MacKenzie and Ohrstrom, discussing with them the contents of future issues and circulation reports. The other young men, Biddle and Oddie, were agreeable fellows, disposed to be friendly, and they frequently asked Bart to lunch with them.

But the new assistant felt he could not afford to lunch. He declined these invitations and made a habit of going without his midday meal. He and Peggy realized they must live not only within their income, but must save something each month. Both were determined, come what would, to appeal to no one.

Help from Jack or Jane, from Gill or from any other member of the family, was positively never to be considered.

Peggy showed herself to be not only a good cook, but an economical one and an excellent housekeeper. The dollar-a-day they finally agreed to spend for the table, she promptly proved to be adequate, and at the end of each week, she would produce proudly a dollar or two, sometimes three, which by careful planning she had managed to save out of the allowance. Bart kept himself down to a dollar a week for his personal expenditure. Almost always he walked to and from his office, and he returned to the frugal habit of rolling his own cigarettes. Often he was able to add to Peggy's weekly savings thirty to forty cents of his own. They had a tin cup on the top shelf of the kitchen which they christened "The Dime Saving and Loan Society," and into this went a steady stream of nickels, dimes, quarters, half dollars, even bills.

They dipped into this fund for their week-end pleasures. Saturday nights they sometimes went to the theater, occupying seventy-five-cent seats in the gallery, dining beforehand plentifully and luxuriously at a French or Italian restaurant where a six-course table d'hôte with wine might be had for fifty cents. Sundays they went to Mass. Now and then, they attended the seven o'clock service at Saint Anne's, gobbled rolls and coffee at a Third Avenue restaurant afterwards, and caught an early train for Coney Island, to spend the day lolling on the sand or braving the breakers with screams and cautioning. More often they lay abed until it was time to scurry for "High," carrying home with them later a tome of Sunday newspaper and a tiny bottle of cream to seat themselves, in what appeared to Bart to be less "than a jiffy", to an overflowing breakfast-luncheon which Peggy seemed miraculously to produce without effort.

Each vied in stating how wonderful the other was, in repeating that theirs was an adventure extraordinary. No one had ever been married in just the way they had, or started out so successfully. New York was the most ravishing place in the world to live, and—if intelligent people only put their minds to it—one of the cheapest.

Life was thrilling, life was glorious, life was beautiful!

"Just think," Bart would say, holding her hands in his, "just think, can you believe it? It's us—you and me! We aren't dreaming this: we're actually doing it!"

Peggy would fix wide dark eyes upon him.

"Do you suppose young married people are always as happy as we are?"

"No, I don't believe it."

"Then why is it?"

"Guess because we're lucky."

"Don't say that, dearest, don't say 'luck.' It's the goodness of our Lord, it's the blessed Virgin looking down and protecting us."

"Do you think we deserve it? Why should we be picked out to be especially blessed?"

"Oh, I don't know why it's so, but let's pray about it, sweetheart; let's thank God and beg Him to make us worthy of His goodness."

"I always do."

"I'm going to ask the priest at Saint Anne's to say a special Mass of thanksgiving for us next week."

Her eyes would film with tears. He would put his arms around her, straining her to him, saying to himself it would be the end of life for him if anything should happen to her. A sensation of terror would come to him at the mere thought of losing her.

Throughout these glamorous days there weighed upon his mind the thought he ought to be about his writing, he must be attempting a short story. It was the only way to increase their meager income. Saving a few dollars each month was sensible, of course, but it was inevitable that they would need a great deal of money sooner or later. The time was not very far distant when new clothes would be necessary, and when Miss Bransom returned, there would be the expense of furnishing another apartment.

But to write in the evenings, on Saturday afternoons or Sundays, he found well-nigh impossible. He was thoroughly fagged when he arrived home at night. There were usually manuscripts to be read, and there was Peggy, who, after she had washed the dishes and put things away, had taken off her apron, brushed her hair, cleaned her hands with half a lemon, freshened and made herself lovely, would come in to interrupt and cuddle against him, wanting to be loved. She was irresistible. Sometimes the scent of her hair turned him giddy; sometimes the touch of her sent the blood whirling to his head.

§ 7

Summer came, hot, moist, enervating. The streets steamed with heat, the leaves hung limply on trees, people drooped and panted. Peggy vowed she loved it.

"Oh, there's nothing about this city I don't love . . . ."

Down at the magazine office, editors and clerks sat about listlessly in their shirt sleeves. Dust, coarse, smutty street dust, came in through the open windows and lay in thick, gritty layers on desks and papers; work was accomplished haphazardly, indifferently. Ohrstrom grew petulant, unreasonable, increasingly critical.

"You're the damnedest fool, Carter! I'll say a prayer of thanksgiving when Miss Bransom's back."

Fear! The terror of losing his job!

He delighted in the atmosphere of *Crosby's;* he liked his associates; he was absorbed in the work. Crosby himself looked in, looked out, a worried expression on his clean, fresh, old-young face, nodded to Bart without seeing him, and anxiously debated with MacKenzie and Oddie the decline in newsstand sales.

Letters from home—news that Tilly had a boy, and that Felix Farnsworth had died of tuberculosis—Gill telephoning and asking Bart and Peggy down to Port Washington over the Fourth—Josephine writing that she was going round the world instead of to Philadelphia, with a friend who was paying all expenses—the beach at Coney Island on sweltering Sundays—tea cooling on the window sill waiting to be iced—Peggy in white dotted swiss, Peggy in trim, snugly fitted Dutch-necked aprons, Peggy in cool, freshly ironed linens—days of petty tasks and petty criticisms—languorous nights of love.

His wife sometimes went to meet him at the entrance of Central Park when, at the end of a grueling day, he came plodding up the Avenue, a bulging satchel of manuscripts dragging at his arm. The sun would be sinking, a brazen ball in a murky mist, children's raucous voices raised in their evening cacophony, hurdy-gurdies tinkling in the near-far distance. Down side streets the stoops of houses would be spotted with bulky women in bulky white clothes, coatless men beside them, palm-leaf fans in hand. Crowded bus tops—taxis, limousines, limousines, taxis—hurtling in one another's wake. Mobs filtering homeward from the Park.

On one such evening Bart came upon her waiting for him at the accustomed spot, and she was in a pink dress—a pink, cotton print, and it lay in soft folds across her round breasts and fell in scallopy cascades to her feet. She had on a new pink hat, too, and carried a pink parasol. The dull, sweat-weary office toilers, the homeward-bound benchers from the Park, turned to look at the radiant vision she made. Bart's heart leaped as his eyes fell upon her.

"My *darling!*" He could only look his astonishment and pleasure.

"Do you like it?" Her shy glance from underneath her dark lashes made him want to take her in his arms careless of onlookers.

"My dear!" He stood and gaped at her, his satchel in one hand, his cheap straw hat in the other, held out as if for alms.

"Silly! Don't be so foolish. People are staring!" She was pleased none the less by the effect upon him.

"Where did you get it?" (Jane probably.)

"Made it," she declared.

"You didn't!"

"Every stitch."

"I don't believe it."

"Well, I did. Camilla gave me the stuff for a wedding present and told me to make it up when the hot weather came. Oh, I've been working on it for weeks," she admitted. "And the hat I trimmed myself on a two-bit frame I bought at Bloomingdale's." She flourished her parasol.

"And that," he demanded, "where did you get that?"

"Oh, I had that; I've had it for years. Jane bought it for me one summer when I wanted to go to a barbecue at the Bacigalupis'."

"You look so adorable, it's all I can do not to put my arms about you right here in the street and kiss you to death."

"Be sensible."

"How can I, when you look so——"

"Heavenly day! Behave yourself. People are watching us!"

"They're looking at *you,* you're so beautiful."

"You're a goose."

"I'm not; I'm a gander—and I'm going to gander you."

"I'll call a policeman!"

"Call him—go on; I dare you to . . . ."

They sauntered homeward beneath the luxuriant shade of the trees that overhung the sidewalk from the Park, unmindful of the heat, oblivious of the world, content wholly with each other.

"I've nothing but a cold dinner for you to-night."

"Grand! I couldn't eat anything hot."

"That's how I was able to come to meet you. There isn't a thing to get ready; table's all set and everything. We might stop for ice, and maybe a quarter pint of cream."

"All right for the ice, but who gets the cream? I know *you* don't take it."

"Well, I thought perhaps you'd like it on a chocolate pudding I've made."

"I prefer canned cow, and you know it."

"How can you!"

"Well, I do; I've always preferred it. . . . . That Carnation brand; it's swell . . . ."

Down two steps into the narrow entryway where bells and mail boxes for the apartments above were located. The ground floor had recently been occupied by a tailor, and often the smell of hot irons on wet woollens filled the stair-well with a sickening, stifling odor. Up the dark, narrow flight, past the first landing, the second, and then, at last, the final ascent to their own floor where in the hallway the framed photographs of Venice and Michelangelo's ceiling brightened the walls.

The door to the front room was open, the brown silk curtains gently puffing and falling in the draft; the table was set, a napkin covering the platters of food. At Bart's place was a tiny package wrapped in tissue paper, tied with a pink ribbon. It caught his eye at once. One of Peg's absurd little nonsenses; he loved them. He went to wash and change his limp collar. The piece of ice was being vigorously spiked by Peggy's firm hand in the kitchen; he could hear the lumps go "plop" into the pitcher of cold tea. Some day he'd have to show her the proper way to make it.

How he loved his orderly, peaceful home, so reflective of his radiant girl, how he loved the graceful, fragrant girl herself, he thought, as he seated himself opposite to her at the mahogany table with its opened drop leaves, shining with china and silverware, with an apple, a pear, and a banana on a blue plate in its center, by way of decoration.

"I'm going to have candles as soon as it grows dark enough, and have them lit every night," said Peggy. "You can get the best-looking glass candlesticks at the Five-and-Ten, and the candles are only five cents apiece, and they'd last for a week, because I'd take good care of them, and besides, we don't dine at home every night, and I think that when we do we ought to have a pretty table, because——"

"What's all this foolishness?" he interrupted, picking up the tissue-wrapped package.

"Oh, just a little surprise for you——"

"You muggins!"

He untied the ribbon, unwrapped the paper; within a small square box was a tiny china doll in a tiny crib. He took out the toy and bent puzzled brows upon it. It baffled him.

"What's the big idea?" he inquired.

She flushed, not looking at him as she served the potato salad.

"It's a baby, stupid! I'm going to have one."

BOOK IV

1920

CHAPTER I

§ 1

"SORRY," apologized the woman with a suitcase, as she jostled the man about to enter the Long Island train. She looked up, and a smile of pleased recognition lighted her face.

"Why, if it isn't the doughty Bart himself!"

"Hello, Mildred. How are you?"

He fumbled with his gloves and packages, finally managing to touch the brim of his hat.

"Whither bound?" Mildred Bransom asked.

"Home. It's Saturday afternoon. We close at twelve."

"You're living at Port Washington?"

"Yes."

"I'm spending the week-end with the Ryans at Great Neck. Let's sit together, if we can find a seat."

One was vacant, and Bart piled his bundles and shabby manuscript satchel in the rack above their heads and stowed Mildred's suitcase beneath his knees.

"You certainly are an eyeful," he said settling beside her. He was impressed by the smartness of her attire; she had both style and beauty. He was thinking: "She's about thirty-seven or -eight. She looks ten years younger; she's come to be a very handsome woman."

"Oh, that's because I've just had a facial and have on a new hat."

He took in the generous seal coat with the mink collar, her brown velvet headgear with its curling golden feather, the tan gaiters, brown shoes, gloves, purse. . . . . A beautiful woman; perhaps a bit emaciated—but all women were trying to be thin these days—and a little faded, but a lovely creature for all that.

"*Crosby's* must be flourishing," he observed.

"We're getting along. We'll pass the million mark this year, I hope."

"You're editor now?"

"Oh, no; managing editor—nothing more, and only that as far as Mr. Crosby allows me to be. . . . . But I want to hear about *you*. What are you doing?"

He smiled and spread out his hands.

"Still *The Shoe Ægis*."

"I'm not talking about your job! I know about that, of course. Just why you left us, I'll never understand."

"More salary, for one thing——"

" 'A mess of pottage.' "

"—and more leisure to write, at least I *thought* there'd be more."

"You did turn out *Almaden*. That was a corking good novel, Bart. Why haven't you kept on?"

"Oh, well, Mildred, you know: children, babies, home, Peggy, commuting. . . . . I haven't the time——"

"You ought to *make* time."

"Easy to say. You don't know how hard it is."

"I know that *Almaden* was one of the best stories I ever read."

"It's nice of you to say so. I've another novel half done, but haven't written a line on it since last summer. The manuscript's round some place."

"Bart, you're *crazy* not to go on! You have a gifted pen, and if you'd only keep at it, I'm positive you'd arrive."

He smiled a pleased, embarrassed smile, and rubbed his worn gloves together.

"I had hoped there was more money in novel writing," he said; "I didn't expect to remain on *The Ægis* more 'an a year.

I took the job just to get a start." Turning toward her, he said with sudden candor: "You know I tore up the best piece of work I ever did."

"What!"

"Yes; it was after *Almaden.* That book was well enough received for me to believe I could make a go of writing, and although I netted no more than my five-hundred-dollar advance, the critics were kind. I had great hopes of becoming a novelist and giving up holding down an office job. That was the reason I quit *Crosby's.* My brother Gill secured me my present position on *The Ægis.* It paid better, and I was to have more time to myself. So for two years I plugged away, getting up early in the mornings, working at night, and finally I finished a book; it was called *Quicksilver,* and it was a good piece of work, if I do say it myself. I took it to the publisher of my first book and at the end of a week he sent for me and told me he would have none of it. . . . . Oh, it's a long history, Mildred; I'm afraid it would bore you."

"But it won't! Go on—*please.*"

"He said the novel was too long, and that he couldn't publish it on account of the nice Germans in it. I had a German family in the book who were very fine people—admirable, praiseworthy, that sort of thing. It was the second year of the war, and this country was getting ready to cast in its lot with the Allies. It wouldn't do to bring out a novel just then which reflected creditably upon Germans and their home life; at least, my publisher thought so. I believed if I met his objections everything would be all right, so I took another year at the book, rewrote it, cut it down by a quarter its length, and changed all my admirable Germans to admirable Swiss. Then I submitted it again, confident it would be accepted, but a second time it was refused. The United States was definitely going into the war then, and my publisher was afraid of the future. Well, we all were. Nobody was buying books; nobody was reading. Conditions, I dare say, had a lot to do with his decision, and I guess he was right, for I couldn't find *any* publisher who wanted my book. I sent it to one after another. When it came back for the twelfth or thirteenth time, I took it downstairs to the cellar and jammed the whole manuscript into the furnace."

"But you kept a copy!"

"I burned that, too, and all my notes."

The woman half squared herself in the seat, fixing him with a searching glance; then she reached out with a quick gesture of her small, gloved hand, squeezed his forearm, and, dropping back, averted her face, staring out at the lights in the tunnel which had begun slowly to file past.

Bart looked down at his rubber overshoes; the snow and icy muck adhering to them from the street had melted in the warmth of the car, and formed little muddy puddles beneath his feet.

Neither spoke again until the train roared out of the underground tube and commenced to race across the snow-patched dumping areas of Long Island. An afternoon sun was shining coldly from a cold sky, and gray smoke from a dozen tall chimneys streamed in the sharp wind; here and there steel skeletons of new factories and apartment houses silhouetted themselves in black tracery against the colorless heavens; the ground lay locked in a January grip.

Bart broke the silence.

"What's happening on the old magazine now?"

"Nothing much; MacKenzie's gone, you know."

"Yes, I heard so, and Ohrstrom was killed in the war."

"Flu," Mildred elucidated. "Tom Oddie's still with us. A good fellow."

"Yes, I always liked Tom."

"You never should have gone. You'd 've been managing editor, now."

"Not with you in the running. Someone was saying only the other day that you were the smartest woman editor in New York."

"Fiddlesticks; there're half a dozen others. But I want to hear more about yourself. How's Peggy?"

"Fine."

"Like Long Island?"

"It's cheaper than town. We tried that for the first few years. Then we moved down here. It's all right, but I hate to be wasting two hours on the train every day when I might be writing. Four years ago, I bought my brother's house in Port Washington. When he went in with Hoover in the Food Administration work, Gill and his wife and their small daughter moved to Washington, D. C., and he let me have his house on easy terms. My brother's a great guy, you know; making scads of money. Right after the war, he secured contracts with the governments of Belgium, Czechoslovakia, Austria, and Poland to furnish them with wheat, flour, and other things. I don't know how he did it, but he did. There was a firm of Belgian bankers behind him but anyhow he's 'Henry A. Carter, Inc., Investment Bankers,' now, and he lives on Riverside Drive and has a Rolls-Royce and a chauffeur. Gill's smart."

"Tell me more about yourself."

He shrugged his shoulders and smiled wanly.

"There's nothing interesting. We get along. We've five kids now——"

"Five?"

"Yep, and they're fine kids, too. The baby was born just two years ago. His birthday's to-morrow, and I'm taking him home a couple of little presents."

"My God!" Mildred said on a breath.

"What's the matter?"

She was silent for awhile, then:

"Oh, nothing! I was just thinking. Children, responsibilities; life's pretty hard. I remember so well how happy and confident you and Peggy were when you started out. How I envied you!"

"Envied us?"

"You both were so disgustingly happy, and you seemed so sure of yourselves. I was awfully in love with a man at the time; he wasn't with me. No doubt that was one of my reasons——

"It was Will Ohrstrom," she broke off suddenly to tell him.

"Ohrstrom! . . . . Oh, I'm sorry."

"You needn't be. I was in love with a Russian army officer two months later. It wasn't so much that you and Peggy were mad about one another, as that you were so desperately interested in your problem, the problem of living and belonging to each other. You struck me as being exactly like a couple of partners working out the man-and-wife problem together. . . . . And has it been a success?"

"Oh, yes, I think so."

"You're happy?"

"Yes, indeed."

"You never long for anything else? Fame, comfort, ease of mind, that leisure you spoke of?"

"Oh, yes, of course; I'd like all those things."

"But your marriage has not brought them to you."

"Perhaps not, but there're compensations."

"No doubt, but I think five children is a tremendous load these days for any one man to carry—well, at any rate, for *you* to carry," she amended.

"Look here," she went on, "please don't misunderstand me. I'm not criticizing you or anybody. But I think you can write, and write exceptionally well—damned well, if you'll excuse me. It's a grand thing to be the father of five children, and I know you love them and they're a great joy and comfort to you, but how about your work, your writing? Isn't that something pretty serious for you to give up? I mean, after all, there aren't many of us who have your talent."

His face grew sober; he was looking straight ahead of him.

"I'm just ordinary," he said dully.

"You're not."

"The latest styles in women's footwear! Boots and shoes! Sending photographs to the engravers'! Keeping track of cuts! That's about my speed!"

"You're . . . . Oh, you make me sick!

"Please, Bart, forgive the impertinent question: What are they paying you down there?"

"A hundred a week. Not bad, d'you think? I could use more, but we manage to get along——"

"Five thousand a year?"

"Fifty-two hundred, to be exact."

"Well, I'm making *twelve thousand,* and my bonus last week, which was the end of the year, was over three thousand more!"

"Gee—that's great!" He was genuinely surprised and pleased.

"My dear, if I had *your* talent, I could make twice as much."

"Oh, come, Mildred, you exaggerate. I'm not *that* clever. I'd like to write, of course, and perhaps I could make five thousand a year at it, but I'd never be popular. In any case, I can't afford to take the gamble."

"Will you try some short stories for us?"

"Certainly, but I'm no good at short stuff."

"We pay much better prices, you know, than we used to."

"I'll see what I can do."

"You won't do a thing, I'm afraid. Any plot in mind?"

"Oh, I don't know; perhaps . . . ."

"You see! . . . . Will you come and have lunch with me some day and talk it over?"

"Surely."

"When?"

"Sometime soon."

"Will you positively call me up?"

"Positively."

Mildred continued to regard him. There was an odd expression in her eyes; it embarrassed him.

She asked: "Where is *The Ægis* published? In the same old antiquated barn?"

"The Gotham House. It's substantial."

"It's substantial enough for a substantial fire! Anyway, it may not burn down for a fortnight, and if I don't hear from you by that time, expect a phone message from me. I'd like to know something about that *Quicksilver* book of yours—what it was about, and if it isn't possible for you to reconstruct it. What's the new one called?"

"Just *The Hacienda*. It's a love story, you know, early California days; I wanted to try something romantic. Think it's silly?"

"Silly? Why I—— Oh hell!" she broke off sharply, with a glance from the window, "here's Great Neck."

He rose to carry her suitcase to the platform.

"You *will* ring me up?" she said, keeping hold of his hand as he took hers in good-bye.

"Surely."

"I'll count on it."

He lifted his hat and went back to his seat.

The houses with their storm doors and windows, snow ledges on roofs and sills, their lawns and gardens spotted with ugly patches of sooty snow, began slowly to move by again.

His mind was on a poem about a garden—a rose garden which storm and wind had changed to a barren, rutted, rocky waste, and at the foot of one gnarled and weather-beaten tree a single rose had somehow come to flower upon an old tattered bush; one day someone who remembered the garden when it had been beautiful came and plucked the rose and bore it away . . . .

The first lines of the verse were forming in his mind, as the train slid into Port Washington.

§ 2

It was a long walk from the station. A northeaster was blowing, and the wind came whipping and cutting off the Sound. Mounds of dirty snow edged the cold hard sidewalks, and glassy ice filmed the slush holes in the frozen road beds. The branches of young saplings, bordering the streets, were stripped bare, and cut the wind with whistling sounds. Bart bent his head to the gustiness, his coat collar turned up, and trudged on, conscious of his cold hands in his worn gloves and his tingling ear tips. He saw young Miller in front of his house trying to start his car, pouring hot water from a steaming kettle into the radiator. "Dutch" McBride was splitting chunks of wood in his back yard, the ax blade flashing each time he swung. The Rosenbaums were getting in a load of coal. A little further on, Milt Enright was sprinkling ashes on the ice-covered stoop before his front door.

"If it keeps on this way," Milt called, "we'll be getting the ice boats out!"

Huddling close together on the brick steps which led from the street to the cement walk encircling the house, Bart came upon his two boys, Danny and Johnny. Danny was wielding a large jackknife in his mittened hand, cutting into a piece of wood, while John was absorbed in watching.

Both scrambled to their feet at sight of their father and rushed upon him, grabbing him about the neck as he bent to kiss them.

"Dad, c'n Johnny and I go over to Shields' pond? Cyril's coming up from the Hollow to take us, but Mom said you'd know best about the ice, an' for us not to go until you came."

Danny talked in the same breathless way as his mother. Bart loved it. As he frowned now judiciously, he was conscious of eager pinched-faced little John, hopefully standing by, looking up at him with his bright shoe-button eyes.

"Well, boys, how about the ice? *I* don't know how thick it is; and you haven't any skates, have you?"

"Oh, we just slide and have loads of fun."

"Cyril will test her out, Dad. All the boys are going over."

"Well, neither of you is a fool," Bart said; "use your noodles and be careful."

"Oh, yes, sir, we *will*."

They hugged him again, their hard, fresh young faces against his own. Dan was like his uncles, Jack and Gill, big with the same sturdy squareness; John was smaller, but strong and wiry. He did not resemble anyone particularly. Both were fine boys, healthy, tumbling, noisy, active youngsters; Bart was proud of them. They looked specially well in their belted Mackinaw coats and Mackinaw caps. As he mounted the steps, he decided that on the first sunny day he'd take photographs of them in these outfits, to send to the folks in California.

Before ascending the wooden steps which rose from the level of the walk to the glassed-in front porch, he glanced up at his home, taking in its proportions, its generous lot, with another feeling of pride.

The house was a double one with four fair-sized rooms downstairs and four bedrooms above. In the rear, an extension contained the kitchen and laundry, and over these was a servant's quarters, a long narrow room which included the head of the back stairway. This connected directly with the room Bart and Peggy occupied, and was used as a nursery for Dickey, the baby, while Kate, the broad-hipped, weighty, good-natured Irish girl, who had been with them ever since they had come to Port Washington, occupied one of the larger chambers on the same floor. The house was just big enough to hold them comfortably as it stood, and the Lord only knew, Bart used often to think, what they would do if the family grew any bigger. The older boys shared the front room over the sitting room, Margaret and Janey occupied the next, above his study, Kate enjoyed in solitude the chamber in the west corner, and he and Peggy had the one adjoining. The bathroom at the end of the hall upstairs served for all.

Gill had been very generous about letting him buy the place. That he could afford to be was no reason, Bart frequently reminded himself, why his good-heartedness should ever be questioned. Alice Dawson, Gill's wife, had unexpectedly inherited a fortune from her grandfather; her father dying almost the same day, the old man's estate had come directly to her. Gill had suddenly found himself the husband of a rich wife. The war broke. His first move had been to dispose of *The Shoe Ægis,* the outstanding publication among his late father-in-law's trade journal enterprises, to one Max Solomon and associates, and next to rid himself of his wife's remaining interests in the Dawson Publishing Company. Approaching Bart at the same time, he had offered to sell him the Port Washington house for just what he had paid for it, agreeing to take back a second mortgage to help him finance the deal. As even this required more income than Bart could command, Gill, by a "high-power sales talk," persuaded Mr. Solomon to "take on" his younger brother at twice the salary he was receiving at *Crosby's*. Gill had then promptly departed for Washington and rarer and larger fields of activity. Bart was grateful; he kept repeating to himself he was grateful, yet there persisted a suspicion that Gill had made use of him.

"You're just a plain ungracious pig!" he said aloud as he stamped heavily on the wooden steps to dislodge the slush and ice from his rubber-shod feet and forced open the weather-strip-bound door of the glass-sheltered porch. He left his rubbers there, pushing them off with either foot, and entered the grateful warmth of the house.

A noise of bumping, thumping, and of children's voices greeted him from the sitting room. Apprehensively, he glanced in. His small daughters, with two other little girls, were amusing themselves with a game called "playing cave." Chairs had been tipped on their faces and sides and these covered with blankets, floor rugs, bedspreads, any kind of drapery which could be impressed into service, and through the dark tunnels thus formed the children crawled about on hands and knees, encountering one another in the dark passage with cries of joy or alarm. To-day the chenille curtains, which hung on either side of the folding doors between dining and sitting rooms, had been unhooked from their rings and utilized in the game. Mentally Bart sighed; it meant that, later, he and none other would have to bring up the stepladder from the basement and restore the curtains to their places. . . . . Oh, well, it was Saturday afternoon, and too cold for them to be playing out of doors.

Margaret, the four-year-old, the shrewdest and brightest of his children, put out her head between two of the covers and piped a shrill welcome at sight of him. Scrambling through the opening, she ran to throw her arms about his neck, draperies dragging, chairs tumbling in a clatter; Jane, aged six, emerged from the far side and trotted in her wake; their little playmates, in whom he recognized Commodore Westover's daughters, thrust out curly, tousled heads and stared up at him.

"Hello, darlings—hello, hello. Cave, hey? You'll put things away, won't you? Where's your mother?"

"She's up with the baaa-by," Margaret shrilled, hugging him.

Peggy's quick tread was heard on the stairs. She descended halfway, then stooped to peer beneath the top of the door into the sitting room.

"Hush—*all* of you! Heavenly day, what a bedlam! You *know* the baby's asleep! *Goodness,* you're making enough racket to wake the dead! . . . . Oh, hello, darling; glad you're home."

She kissed Bart over the banisters.

"Tired, sweetheart?"

"So-so."

"I'm sorry, dear, but you'll have to look at the washtubs, because I'm horribly afraid the pipes are burst, and Kate can't get a drop of water out of them, so she's cross as two sticks."

"Did you telephone Jones?"

"In the first place, I wasn't sure, and in the second, I didn't want that old dodderer fumbling round here if there wasn't any real reason. Besides, I didn't have time. . . . . You *will* keep quiet, girls, won't you? Dickey ought to sleep for another half hour."

Bart took off his overcoat, hung it in the overflowing closet beneath the stairs, and carried his satchel of office papers into the room generally referred to as his study. To-day, however, Peggy had been doing some sewing there. The rug was covered with pins, threads, snips of cloth; a sewing machine was backed up against a bookcase. Sighing again, he went kitchenward to inspect the faulty plumbing. There, Kate, revealing herself from behind a line of drying dish towels and diapers, at once launched into a recital of the inconvenience to which she had been put by the lack of water. Started on this topic, her eloquence stirred her, and other grievances coming to mind, she poured them forth in a mounting, self-agitating recital of wrongs, ending in a flat affirmation that the work was too hard for any Christian woman, and as nobody appreciated her services after four long years of doing her best, she might as well give notice and find another place.

Bart began with light words of sympathy and praise to soothe her and to dispose of her troubles, which ranged all the way from impertinences of the butcher to forays on the ice box and pantry stores by depredating small boys. But at the appalling possibility of the woman's actually deserting them, he sat down in one of the kitchen chairs and, drawing breath, attacked the situation with serious reasoning, settling one difficulty after another, ending triumphantly with the big-hearted Irishwoman mopping her eyes and telling him he was the most understanding employer she'd ever worked for, that Mrs. Carter was the kindest woman she knew, and that there were no dearer or finer children in the whole world than the Carter quintette.

Peggy's sharp summons down the back stairs for Kate to bring up Dickey's "woollies," a species of garment including leggings, sweater, and hooded cap, came somewhat inopportunely at this moment, but Kate sniffingly obeyed, and Bart, congratulating himself that a crisis had been successfully handled, went to inspect the laundry tubs, to discover that, alas, the pipes had indeed burst and that it was unavoidably and urgently a case for Jones.

§ 3

Upstairs he found Dickey lying luxuriously on a bath towel spread upon the bed, and Peggy washing the child's buttocks and fat legs with a soapy wash cloth. The room was warm and smelled of the kerosene burner and the soaked sheet from the crib which had been hung upon a chair before the stove to dry. Bart leaned over the bent figure of his wife and prodded his youngest son in the center of his small, fat belly. The boy gurgled, waving his round legs in the air, his smile displaying a creditable row of small teeth in an area of red gum.

"Dad-dee, Dad-dee, Dad-dee, Dad-dee . . . ."

"He ought to be *ashamed* of himself," Peggy said; "a big boy, his age!"

"Hello, Two-year-old," Bart addressed him. "I brought you home something you're going to like, but you can't have nuffin' till to-morrow, and to-morrow Kate's going to make you a great big cake with two whole candles on it."

"What in the world were you gabbing with her about?" Peggy wanted to know.

"Oh, she was in one of her temperamental moods. I had to pat her on the back and calm the troubled waters of her spirit."

"I wish you wouldn't bother with her. You go down there and agree with her, telling her how wonderful she is and how she's abused and all that, and it doesn't do one particle of good, because it just demoralizes her, and I won't get her to do a single blessed thing for a month! . . . . Oh, I heard you!"

"But, my dear, she was going to quit!"

"Nonsense! She wouldn't quit for anything. The minute you come round, she feels she has to blow off a lot of steam because you're always ready to listen to her and make her feel she's put upon, that I don't appreciate her, and it just makes it a million times harder for me——"

"Oh, come, come, come," he remonstrated, putting an arm across her shoulders and drawing her to him; "stop your crabbing and kiss your old man. What's the big idea? Don't you ever kiss your husband any more when he comes home?"

She lifted her round, rosy face and laid her flushed, warm cheek against his own for a moment. The scent of talcum powder was about her, and her hair was sweet with the rare fragrance that always clung to it and which he loved to breathe. She seemed strong and vital as he held her in his arms; but with all her firmness, she was still soft and tender. Childbearing had ripened her.

She gave herself to him now, but returned his kiss distractedly, her eyes upon the sprawling, half-dressed baby on the bed. She strove to pull away, but Bart would not let her go; he hugged her closely, kissing the smooth curve of her neck and bare shoulder.

"Bart, Bart," she protested; "please! I simply 've *got* to get this child out while there's still some warmth in the sun. In an hour it will be too wretchedly cold."

"Aw, let him wait," he said hungrily, breathing deeply of her sweetness.

She freed herself with a determined push, and sitting upon the bed, began expertly to jerk Dickey's legs and arms into his "woollies," pulling the thick, furry hood well down over his ears.

Bart watched her, a smile on his lips, a perplexed wrinkle marking his brow. He yearned for her, his love growing big. Peggy was superb; it was surprising how well she ran the house and the children; she was always planning, or working, and when she complained it was rarely of or for herself. Vital, he thought—strong and vital. He often wondered how it was she remained so fresh and sweet; she never gave a thought to her personal appearance; even now, one thick braid of hair had loosened, an end dangling on her shoulder, a streak of powder marked her neck, and her hands were hard and knuckly, the finger tips rough, the nails blunt. He noticed the white firm globes of her full breasts as she bent over her task, and the flawless sculptured valley between them.

"Dearest," she said, fastening the last button of Dickey's sweater, "his rubbers are down there in all that mess on the floor of the stairs' closet. Find them for me—will you, darling?—and put them on him. I must get at this room, and I'm trying to finish up that dress for Janey I promised her at Christmas."

"Surely," he told her; "and I'll do more: I'll drag this kid on one of the boys' sleds clear down to the Yacht Club and back if you'll give your husband a kiss and a real one."

Her dark eyes widened with pleasure.

"Oh, my dear, *will* you? I didn't know what I *was* going to do with him this afternoon, because I'm just up to my neck with all kinds of things, and I hated to ask Janey and Margaret to take him out, because it's so wretchedly cold and they are having such a good time with their game. Indeed I'll kiss you, and I only wish it might be more."

She put her round smooth arms about his neck and raised her lips to his. He strained her to him kissing her mouth, her cheeks, her neck, while the blood beat up into his head and throbbed behind his closed eyelids. It seemed to him he could not breathe deeply enough of her.

"God!" he said, hugging her, and again, "God!"

After a little, they drew apart, holding each other at arm's length, their lips parted, their eyes shining.

"God!" Bart said once more; then: "Isn't it wonderful to love each other this way after ten years?"

Peggy did not answer; she stood looking at him, still smiling, her eyes traveling over his face, feature by feature. She kissed him lightly then on the tip of his nose, pushed past him, hurrying into Dickey's nursery, and commenced pulling his soiled and rumpled crib apart.

§ 4

Jones promised to come "the first thing Monday morning," and Bart set his mittened muffled, and hooded youngest on Dan's sled and, strapping him on board, proceeded to draw him over the hard, snowy ground, down the hill, and along the rutted, icy lane which led to the Yacht Club. The wind whipped coldly at him, wrapping the flaps of his overcoat about his legs, and his feet continually slipped and slid a little on the frozen surfaces. Dickey's fat cheeks were apple red, and he shouted boisterously whenever his father paused for breath.

The Club was bleak, wind-blown, and deserted. A field of gray, lumpy ice stretched out into the water along the shore, and toward the upper end of the Bay the pack formed an unbroken sheet clear to the Great Neck side. A number of boats lay jacked up on trestles along the beach; the wind tore at their lashed protecting canvases, fluttering them angrily. Bart looked in at the empty square hall where the dances were held during the summer. Windows rattled in the draft made by the door he had opened, and an American flag, draped behind the musicians' stand, billowed toward him with a hostile flap. The big room was bleak and forlorn. In one corner, boxes packed with Christmas tree tinsel and ornaments had been piled, and in another stood some square cartons containing a few left-over favors used at the Hallowe'en dance. He appropriated a paper witch and a diminutive jack o'lantern to amuse Dickey, and then turned back, plodding step by step up the steep incline toward home.

As he climbed the hill, his thoughts returned to Mildred Bransom. A fine woman, intelligent, attractive . . . . a damn smart editor . . . . certainly she had made good. He might have had her job. She had said so herself. At any rate, she knew her business, and she had told him he could write, urged him to keep at it. That story, *The Hacienda,* had a good idea in it. He'd take a look at it after Peggy and the kids were in bed that evening. He might be able to finish it in six months. He wondered what Mildred would think of it.

§ 5

The first glimpse of his home sent these reflections flying. Something unusual had occurred. One of Thornwall's taxis stood at the door. The driver and another man were standing on the sidewalk before it, conversing. As Bart came up, the latter introduced himself; he was Mrs. Shields' butler. Johnny, it appeared, had broken through the ice on the pond, had been completely submerged, but had clung to the edge of the hole until his companions, with the aid of some planks, had succeeded in fishing him out. They had brought the drenched, half-frozen little boy up to the Shieldses' kitchen to be warmed, and Mrs. Shields, after putting some dry clothing on him, had told her butler to telephone for a taxi and take the boy home with his brother. Johnny was all right, the man assured Bart; his mother had put him in bed and was giving him a hot drink.

In the boys' room upstairs, Bart found the family and the girls' small friends gathered about Johnny's bed. Peggy was at his side, giving him tablespoonfuls of hot lemonade, while the youngster himself and his brother Dan continued to interrupt each other in a garbled report of the accident.

"I yelled at him, Mom, honest I did; I yelled: 'Fall on your belly, you big fool!' Of course, he didn't hear me, 'cause he was going lickety-split after the buck——"

" 'Buck'? I don't understand."

"Aw, gee, that's what we play hockey with! Cyril gave it an awful swat——"

"It wasn't Cyril, it was 'Spud' Miller——"

"It was not!"

"It was too——"

"Go on, I'll betcher! I'll betcher a nickel it wasn't 'Spud.' "

Peggy looked up and smiled at her husband as he came in, the baby slung like a sack under his arm.

"We've had quite a scare. They told you?"

"Yes; the men downstairs did. How is he?"

"Oh, fine."

"Any chill or sniffling?"

"See for yourself!"

"You don't want to send for Doc Adams?"

"Oh, no; why should I? He's perfectly all right."

"Was it cold, Johnny?"

"Golly—you bet!"

"Were you scared?"

"Aw, gosh, no; there was nothing to be scared about. The fellows were all there. I just hung on until they came and pulled me out."

"Mrs. Shields was certainly most kind. I've already called her up and thanked her. I'll never forget her kindness as long as I live."

CHAPTER II

§ 1

Johnny's period of enjoying the family's solicitude was short-lived. There came a slithering crash from his room a few minutes after his parents had left it which brought both back on the run and awoke Dickey, asleep after his five-o'clock bottle, with a wail of fright. It proved nothing more serious than a broken windowpane caused by a misdirected pillow aimed at a taunting Dan. Peggy dealt summarily with the situation; she banished the older boy and ordered John to get up and dress for dinner.

Bart was pleased. He did not like it when any member of the family was absent from the dinner table. He enjoyed it when they were all there, with Peggy opposite him, ladling out soup from the tureen or serving the vegetables and dessert. He himself always attended to the meat. To-night there were corn soup and a browned leg of lamb, roasted potatoes, lima beans, and steaming hot beets; the dessert was floating island, one of Kate's triumphs, popular with all.

His eyes went fondly from child to child around the table. They were all healthy youngsters, although each had had his or her share of sickness. Last spring, the baby had given them a serious time of worry; Peggy's milk had grown too rich for him; Dickey had to be weaned. For weeks Doc Adams had been obliged to experiment with various formulas before finding one to agree with him. It had been only last September that Janey had come down with what had looked suspiciously like diphtheria, and all the children had to be inoculated, and just before Christmas Dan had dislocated his shoulder while sledding, and to-day, here was Johnny breaking through the ice and nearly getting himself drowned! They seemed to invite disease and disaster, Bart thought.

"Dad, now lissen: I'm awfully sorry about that window;

honest to goodness I am, an' I feel fine—no chill nor nothin'—and c'n I go to the movies with Dan? Gee, Pop, truly, I feel fine. Ask Mom."

Bart looked across the table for his cue.

"I don't see why he shouldn't," Peggy said; "I'll bundle him up warm, and—you'll come straight home afterwards, won't you, boys?"

"Oh, sure, Mom; straight."

"You see, it's Saturday night," Peggy explained.

"What's the picture, Dan?" Bart always asked the name of the film. He enjoyed a good movie, but it was seldom he was able to see one. Peggy would not leave the baby alone, and he did not like going without her. Moreover, there was usually office work to be done. He asked the picture's name, nevertheless, hoping it might be one so alluring that the temptation to see it would override other considerations. His question, however, never received a better answer than Dan's present:

"Oh, something or other. . . . . I don't know."

Hurrying through the meal, the boys departed for the early performance. Bart helped pile the dishes, which Janey and Margaret carried in small lots to the slide window through which Kate's large, disposing hands received them. He next went down to the basement and brought up the ungainly stepladder. While he was rehanging the sitting-room curtains, Peggy induced her small daughters to aid her in picking up the threads and scraps from the study floor.

"I thought the Fultons might drop in for bridge to-night," she called.

On the top of his rickety perch, Bart let fall his hands holding the curtain, and a breath of distaste escaped him. He had counted on reading over his manuscript, *The Hacienda,* that evening. Playing cards with Peggy too often resulted in unpleasantness; she was an indifferent player, yet resented any word of criticism. Particularly he regretted a visit from the Fultons, as he cordially disliked Mrs. Fulton, who was ogling, assertive, and talkative.

Whenever Peggy said someone *might* drop in, he was sure that that person had been invited and was positively coming. He wagged his head and drew a second heavy breath. If obliged to put aside his work, there were many things he preferred doing to playing bridge with the Fultons: going with his two boys to the movies for one thing, and for another, on Saturday nights the "gang" always gathered at the Yacht Club. The "gang" were the men he liked best among his neighbors. On Saturday nights during the winter, none of the members' wives came to the Club, but the men played Five Hundred, and the club steward served coffee and sandwiches at midnight. Ren Small would be there, and "Dutch" McBride, Percy Hacket, Chip Rhodes, contractors, real estate men, master mechanics were the types. Most of them had their business interests in the town, and Bart found contact with them stimulating and diverting. They seemed to relieve him of the pressure of life somehow.

Janey and Margaret were put early to bed, each supplied with a book, and told to pull out the electric light above their heads promptly at nine. Kate heavily departed—she always went out in the evenings to visit friends in the Hollow—and a little after eight, the Fultons announced their arrival by a vigorous honk-honking of their motor horn, and noisily trouped in.

The evening turned out exactly as Bart had feared. The guests won continually, Maud Fulton casting arch glances in his direction, rubbing her knee against his own. Peggy bid with bad judgment and made one mistake after another. At his third remonstrance—and there was an edge to his tone—her eyes filled, and for the rest of the rubber Bart saw she was biting her lips to keep from crying. When again she could trust herself to speak, she avoided addressing him or meeting his penitent look. He was increasingly irritated: at the run of the cards, at Bob Fulton's strong cigar, at Maud Fulton, who recognized his dark mood and sought to cheer him out of it by nudges of her knee and covert, ogling glances, at himself for agreeing to play, and more particularly for being such a fool as to criticize his wife.

At a few minutes past nine, the boys came in, kissed their parents, and thumped upstairs to bed. At eleven, Peggy brought from the kitchen a tray of ginger ale and cookies. At quarter to one, the Fultons went home with Bart's check for fourteen dollars. Then, at last, he could square himself to the work of making peace. He dreaded the long road he must travel before this would be accomplished, but there was no alternative; Peggy must be consoled, and they must be friends once more before they went to sleep. Humbly, penitently, patiently, he addressed himself to the task.

No, Peggy didn't want to discuss it; no, she was too tired; no, there was no need for him to say he was sorry; it was all right; she wasn't in the least provoked; no, it was all right. Of course, the Fultons had gone home laughing at them—laughing and joking about a man who didn't know how to speak to his wife—and laughing and joking about a wife who put up with it . . . .

Bart must reiterate his regret and self-condemnation; he must unceasingly implore forgiveness.

Tears at last, and he saw them with relief, recognizing the first step towards capitulation. Yet it tore his heart to see her cry. She did not weep like most women. Large crystal tears welled up in her dark eyes and fell upon her cheeks, while occasionally her chin quivered like a little girl's. But there was never a sob nor a sniff. He watched her, his fingers locked together, beating his clasped hands slowly upon his knee in distress. She took up the baby, carried him to the bathroom, smoothed his sheets and pillow, pinned his covers to the corners of the mattress with horse-blanket pins, while her tears slowly fell. She turned up the unlit wick of the kerosene stove, placing a match box upon its metal top to have it handy in the frigid hour of waking, undressed, donned wrapper and slippers, and sat down before her dressing table to braid her hair. Still the drops fell, and now and then her small round chin shook.

Bart's misery became unbearable. He could not understand how his criticisms of her playing, tart-sounding though they might have been, could bring such grief. He told himself again and again he was both a criminal and a fool.

When she rose, he could restrain himself no longer.

"Darling, darling—" he seized her in his arms—"I can't stand it, I just can't bear it another minute . . . ."

Perhaps it was the ringing note of pain in his voice, perhaps it was his exasperated determination to tolerate her stubbornness no longer, perhaps it was the very roughness with which he handled her, but he saw with a great outpouring of love for her and joy for himself, the first flicker of softening in her eyes. Once she had begun to weaken, he knew that complete pardon was not far off.

"Sweetheart, you *will* forgive me?"

"Yes—yes, I'll forgive you."

"I'm such a surly, unmannerly pup!"

"No, you're not that; I'm too sensitive, that's all."

"Darling, I'll never say 'boo' to you in a bridge game as long as I live."

"That's the only way I'll ever learn to play."

"My God, you don't know what agony I go through when you're mad at me!"

"I'm sorry, dearest; truly, I am."

"I'm the one to be sorry; don't *you* go apologizing to me!"

"I'm terribly sorry just the same."

"You've nothing to be sorry for."

"I'm a silly fool."

"You're not; you're adorable."

"If you only will always think so."

"Do you love me?"

"You *know* I do."

"Would you marry me again?"

"A hundred times."

"You muggins! Kiss me."

Their lips met, the beat of their hearts rose. They drew apart, looking into one another's eyes; slowly they came together again, arms enfolding, clasping each other, mouth against mouth, while senses commenced to swim, and their breathing quickened.

One primitive, compelling urge filled Bart's being. In his arms was the woman he loved, who belonged to him, who was his mate. He wanted her. He pulled her over toward the bed. She sank to its side, but in a moment wrenched herself free, pushing him away, holding him from her with strong arms, panting while she struggled to find her voice.

"No-no, Bart, no-no. Be sensible, dear. Wait! Let's think! We mustn't, Bart—we mustn't; it would mean another baby positively, and we don't want another just yet. Listen, listen, darling. Wait a moment. *Please*. Not another. Bart, not another just yet. Wait until we get ahead, wait until you get a raise or we have a little more put away. That would mean six, Bart—*six* children—and, oh, I'd be fat and clumsy and good-for-nothing for nine months, and I need every bit of myself for the others——"

"But I love you, Peg——"

"I know, dear——"

"And you love me——"

"Oh, indeed I do."

"Then is this sort of thing to go on for the rest of our lives, you always repulsing me?"

"My dear, I'm not repulsing you!"

"What do you call it?"

"I don't know, I don't know! I only know it would be simply madness for us to have another baby right away."

"Darling, listen . . . ."

While she had been speaking, she had risen to her feet, and had tried to free herself from his detaining hands. Now he drew her down forcibly beside him on the bed.

"Why not be sensible, sweetheart," he went on, "and do what Doc Adams suggests——"

"Peg, darling," he urged, as she commenced to shake her head, "hear me out—please, ... if you love me! Other people do it, thousands and thousands and thousands. I'll bet there isn't a woman you know who doesn't do something to prevent herself from having a child. There are lots of perfectly safe and sure ways——"

"No, *no;* Bart, it's wrong——"

"It *isn't!* We've been over and over this—a thousand times! We're both agreed we have all the children we want. I'll never be a rich man, and we've got to face that fact. We don't want to go downhill and get in debt, bringing more and more babies into the world——"

"I know all that," she interjected; "I don't want to be like Aunt Lizzie or Eva Ann; I don't *want* any more children——"

"Well, what are we going to do about it? Are we going to go on for the next ten or fifteen years, living together and loving, and never knowing each other? What do you expect will become of us? What do you expect me to do? . . . .

"Peg, you're not like most women; Doc Adams says you're not, and I *know* it. There's never a week in the month when it is safe for you. Three times now, we thought it was O K to go ahead; *you* figured it all out, and what happened? Jane, and then Margaret, and then, two years ago, the baby. Do you know how long it has been since I've had you? Over a year! Most men can enjoy their wives while they're nursing; I can't. You were still nursing Johnny—he wasn't six months old—when you became pregnant again. You're never safe. My God, sometimes I'm almost afraid to kiss you! Doc Adams says he knows lots of women like you. We don't dare take a chance. Why not be sensible and do what Doc suggests, or let *me* do something?"

Straightening herself, Peggy looked at him with sternness, and there was the light of determination in her eyes.

"Bart, I'd never dare go near the Sacraments again as long as I lived, if I did what you ask me. It's a mortal sin, and there isn't any question about it. When I went to confession to Father Francis before we were married, I asked him straight out about this thing then, and I've twice talked about it to Father Hennessy; both say it's wrong, and that no true woman would ever do such a thing, and that the Church is unalterably opposed to it——"

"Rubbish!"

"Bart Carter! Don't you *dare* say it's rubbish!"

"Eight women out of ten practise birth control, and Catholic women, too."

"That's not so, and your just saying so doesn't prove it. I have a conscience and a soul, and I couldn't look my children—my Janey and my Margaret—in the face, if I stooped to anything so degrading and unnatural——"

"Aw, come off, Peggy."

"I *won't* come off, and if you think what you ask is a decent thing for a woman to do, why is there a law in this country making it a penitentiary offence for anybody to send information through the mails which will tell people how not to have babies?"

"Because it's a damn fool law, and we're the only country in the world that has one like it.

"Peg," he began again in more conciliatory tones, "you're all wrong about this thing—truly you are. Let me ask Doc Adams to come up here and have a talk with you. He'll tell you what's what; he'll set you straight in a jiffy."

"Doctor Adams can't advise or make me do something I know is a sin."

"Oh, gee, Peg," Bart said wearily.

"We're man and wife to have babies, and we cease being man and wife when we deliberately go about preventing ourselves from having babies. Doing what you ask me is horrible, and I couldn't love you if I did what was so disgusting, so repugnant!"

"Oh, gee, Peg," he repeated, suddenly losing interest.

He leaned toward her and kissed her lightly on the cheek, rose and got into bed, jerking the covers over his shoulder, settling his head in the pillow.

He knew Peggy was kneeling beside her own bed, praying. After a long time he heard her rise, open the windows, and snap out the lights. Her bed springs squeaked as she lay down.

After a little:

"Good-night, Bart . . . ."

"Good-night, dear," he answered, but his jaws were shut.

§ 2

For another hour he lay awake, thinking over his married life, remembering particularly the hopeless, defeated feeling that had come to him when Peggy had told him, eight months after Johnny was born, another child was on the way. That had been a terrible moment for him, a moment which had stretched to days and weeks and months, in fact, had altered all his life. Something had gone out of him then. He had put his hope of writing definitely and forever from him; in its place, he had accepted drudgery, the shoe magazine, realizing he must bend all his energies to his job, make money, try for a raise.

Then, after Janey had been born, in a few months there had been Margaret, and in little over a year, Peggy had again come to him, this time tearfully, to confess she had started again. Another baby; Dickey, this time! In five years, Bart's entire point-of-view had altered, and he with it. He had become a totally different person, he knew; he was only a clerk, now, a commuter, a plodding suburbanite with a wife and five children!

The war! He had desperately wanted to go to the first Plattsburg training camp. From the first he had recognized it was an impossibility, but he liked to talk of it. Others had gone; he had seen them off with a smile, but no one had suspected the darkness of his soul, not even Peggy. It was in April of that same year he experienced the bitter disappointment of his publisher's refusal of *Quicksilver* . . . .

He remembered standing in the Pennsylvania Station, his rejected manuscript under his arm, waiting for Peggy, who had brought the children to the city to be photographed. It had been arranged they were to meet "under the clock" and take the five-twenty out to "Port." When she finally appeared, herding the two little boys before her, the toddling Janey's hand in hers, the two-months-old Margaret in her free arm, he saw she was on the point of collapsing with fatigue. He had not the heart to break the news to her then. As they stood waiting for the train gate to open, Janey's milk bottle, wrapped up along with the baby in her mother's arms, in some way slipped from the folds of the shawl and crashed to the stone pavement, spattering glass and milk for yards around. There had been a little titter in the crowd.

That broken, splintered bottle had seemed to Bart fittingly to symbolize the crash and destruction of all his hopes.

He had tried his best in *Quicksilver,* he had given all he had to the book, believing that by industry and perseverance he could establish himself, and, to use an old phrase of Gill's, "pull himself up by the boot straps," and win recognition as a writer.

Vividly he recalled the earnest talk he had had with Peg in '16, when he had tried to make her understand what success would mean to him, to her, to the children. She had listened wide-eyed, attentively, but he had seen—all too clearly—she had lost faith in him. For six years she had patiently endured his attempts, encouraging him at times, humoring him at others, and still again frankly unsympathetic. As he had struggled, painstaking, laboriously, she had grown more and more impatient. The long hours at his desk, at night, in the mornings, on holidays and Sundays and half Saturdays, took him from her; his slavery interfered with her plans; she resented it. When *Quicksilver* was returned, rejected by one publisher after another, she lost her last shred of confidence in his literary ability. Looking back, Bart could see that even the publication of his first novel had meant little more to her than the satisfaction she had derived from showing a copy to Maud Fulton and some of the neighbors saying "My husband's book; have you seen it? It's just published. . . . . Oh, yes, Bart wants to become a writer. . . . . You liked it? Oh, that's simply *darling* of you to say so . . . ."

He thought of Mildred who *knew,* and of the embers of his half-dead ambition which with a few words from her of real understanding and appreciation she had fanned to flame . . . .

Ah, well, Peggy hadn't been brought up to literature; she did not have time to read; she was too busy looking after the house and the children.

What about children, more of them? No. Not another, not a sixth! That would be *finis*. Never write, then. They must *not* have another child! Wasn't that just what Peggy had said? Oh, yes, of course . . . . of course; she was right . . . . always . . . .

That unfinished novel of his . . . . it wasn't so bad. Mildred might think it good. It *was* good, as he remembered it; it had a popular appeal. Love stories always "went"—and the yarn was not slush!

Peggy? God, how he wished she was lying beside him right that moment, her lovely head with its fragrant braids resting on his shoulder, his arm about and beneath her, sleeping next to him the way she used to when they were first married! . . . . How adorable she was!

He pressed his face into the soft, inanimate pillow against his cheek, drew it to him, sighed wearily, and fell asleep.

§ 3

Shortly after five o'clock the next morning, Dickey woke both parents by thumping on the wall with his empty milk bottle. Bart rose, lit the kerosene stove, shut the windows, took away the milk bottle, shook his fist at his son, and, shivering, went back to bed. At six, he dragged himself out again, donned slippers and wrapper, descended the back stairs and the flight to the basement below, to shake down the furnace and turn on the damper; at six-thirty, he was dressed, overcoated, muffled, and—successfully starting the old trustworthy Dodge on the first engine turnover—brought the car around to the front door and superintended the family getting into it: Dickey on Kate's lap next the driver's seat, Peggy and the four other children crowded in back.

Early Mass, a frigid church, Father Hennessy murmuring disconsolately on the altar; cold, sharp, frosty air, the wheels of the car crunching through brittle ice; breakfast between eight and nine—hot, delicious,—the Sunday morning papers in rustling, cascading sheets over the dining-room floor; the children absorbed in the "funnies"; a flurry of snow, more coal on the furnace; checks to write; a letter; Mrs. Small ringing up to talk to Peggy; Commodore Westover telephoning to know if Bart would serve on the Yacht Club's Entertainment Committee; tinkering with the Dodge which needed its crank case drained; Peggy calling him to turn the ice-cream freezer; Peggy calling him to take Dickey his bottle; Peggy calling him to dinner.

After he had eaten—and eaten too heartily—he hunted for the manuscript of *The Hacienda* and discovering it in a drawer beneath the bookshelves, spread it out on his desk and began to turn its scrawled and crisscrossed pages. As he was becoming interested, Dickey woke up, fretting and whimpering from his nap. Peggy said she thought he was cutting another tooth and brought him down to the study, asking if he might not play about on the floor. It was really too cold for him to go out, she said. The children racketed through the house, a neighbor's little girl came in to join them, and Janey yowled and blubbered when, distracted and irritated by the clamor, Bart gave a definite "no" to her plea to be allowed to play "cave" again.

Towards four o'clock, Peggy, pitying him, took the crowd out of doors, pushing Dickey's go-cart before her, the older children cavorting in her wake. Bart hopefully settled down to his manuscript, only to have a compelling drowsiness overcome him. He struggled against it, gave up, and climbed the stairs to his room, to fling himself gratefully upon his bed.

Supper, beans, gingerbread, and hot chocolate—the old Los Robles Sunday supper—and then more running and bumping and tumbling on the stairs—up and down, up and down,—squeaks, shouts, yells, screams of laughter . . . .

Bart had grown used to it through the years, and sometimes could concentrate in spite of the noise, but to-night it seemed pandemonium had been let loose. He complained fretfully to Peggy. He couldn't stand any more of it, he said; but she did not think the racket unusual, and told him he was getting cranky and irritable in his old age.

She herded the troop to bed, however, a little earlier than usual, and the house quieted down by nine o'clock, with the girls and the baby asleep, and the boys reading in bed. Peace, quiet. It was like a summer afternoon after a thunderstorm.

He took up his manuscript with relief and interest.

§ 4

Peggy looked in at ten.

"Coming, dear?" she inquired.

"I think I'll work to-night," he told her, half wheeling in his chair to look at her as she stood in the doorway. "I won't be up much before midnight. You turn out the light. I shan't need it."

She pouted in a cute little way which she knew had special charm for him.

"Aw, come off, muggins," he protested.

"Let the old work go," she begged. "Is it really something important?"

"Well, it's . . . . ah . . . . it has nothing to do with *The Ægis;* it's that old novel of mine, the one I was working on last summer. . . . . I thought I'd take another whack at it."

His wife came slowly toward him, the pout fading, a troubled look in her eyes. She put her hand on his shoulder and gazed past him to the manuscript where it lay spread out in confusion on the desk. She did not speak for a minute. Then she kissed him on the hair and drew his head against her heart.

"Poor old darling," she said tenderly.

CHAPTER III

§ 1

THE Dawson Publishing Company occupied an antiquated building in a congested part of the city, an old frame structure, fifty years standing, with fluted columns and heavily corniced windows. *The Shoe Ægis,* now under a different management, occupied the fifth floor, and its offices ranged up and down a long dark hall which followed at angles a dim, dirty well in the center of the building. Bart usually caught the seven-forty-five from Port Washington, took a southbound subway for half-a-dozen stations, walked six blocks eastward, and arrived to work at five minutes to nine. His office was first in the line, and he occupied it with his stenographer and assistant, Miss Schwartz. On the frosted glass panel of the door was lettered in black: "Mr. Carter. Art Editor."

The advertising manager, Mr. Bliss, had the room next to his, and beyond, and in succession along the hall, were the composing room, the reception room, the sanctum of Mr. Max Solomon, the office of the fashion editor, Madame Blum, the editorial rooms, and the office of the editor-in-chief, old Mr. Vonderlies. On the opposite side of the corridor were located the circulation department, the addressing and stencil rooms, the stockroom, the lavatories, etc.

While Bart's official title was "art editor," his duties had little to do with art and less to do with those of an editor. They consisted in carrying out the orders of Mr. Vonderlies, Madame Blum, and Mr. Bliss, and having half-tone cuts made of the photographs they handed him, photographs of shoes, shoes of every description, pumps, boots, bootees, slippers, sandals, arctics, rubbers, brogans, leggins, puttees—shoes, men's, women's, children's—high shoes, low shoes, shoes with high heels, low heels, buckled, strapped, bowed—Spring model Style "A," Fall model Number 23589—buttoned, laced, plain . . . .

Every day he sat by Mr. Vonderlies or Madame Blum, occasionally at the desk of Mr. Bliss, and was handed the photographs they wished reproduced in the pages of *The Shoe Ægis*. It was then his task to mark on the back of each the size of the cut desired, whether or not the background was to be air-brushed, the half-tone to be silhouetted, vignetted, or squared. As the cuts returned from the engravers', Bart filed them away in the shallow drawers of large cabinets which ranged the walls of his office. When they were to be used in the magazine, he sent them to the electrotyper to be blocked on metal, and delivered them next to the composing room, where they were locked up with the type. A second time they went to the electrotyper, who made electros of the forms, delivered these to the printer and returned the forms to the composing rooms. When the cuts were "released," Bart had once more to take charge of them, put them away in the cabinets, and produce them upon demand. There were thousands of these small, heavily blocked-on-metal half-tones, and Miss Schwartz kept proofs of them pasted in a large scrapbook, with a file number under each, so that they might be readily located.

It was dull, deadly uninteresting work. He hated it. He was ashamed of it. He did it acceptably, giving what was expected of him, nothing more. It was a job—a job that gave him a living wage, paid for his insurance, his interest on the mortgages, the food and clothes he and his family ate and wore. There was none of the joy or pride in it he had known on *Crosby's*. Whenever he thought of what he had sacrificed in resigning from that magazine, his heart grew heavy. It had appeared imperative to him to have a larger income, at the time; he had four children, another was expected, and Gill had come to him offering a position which would pay twice the money he was then receiving, with a chance to buy a home, a real one. His brother had seemed an agent of the Lord. Bart had been worried to the point of nervous headaches and indigestion, was discouraged, overworked. He and Peggy had been steadily falling behind in their bills; economize as they might, the debts mounted; both were sick of their squalid, ugly Bronx neighborhood and the noisy, smelly apartment house in which they had six small crowded rooms. He had been passionately anxious for leisure to write. In Gill's offer, he thought he saw an avenue for escape; it had meant a home, country for the children, a chance to save, time to try his pen.

Four years had passed, and he found himself practically in the same situation as before, with worry, debts, discouragement mounting around him; only now it was infinitely worse. The contacts throughout his days galled and irritated him. He writhed at his association with men and women whose outlook on life had to do with shoes, and whose only conversation dealt with spring styles, fall styles, profits for the shoe dealer, sales policies for the shoe dealer, window displays for the shoe dealer, and the eternal catering to shoe advertisers. Darkest of all was the feeling that hope of something better was growing dimmer day by day.

Insurance, interest on the first mortgage, interest on the second, Doc Adam's account—in the hundreds now—Butler's bill, Swanberg's bill, Wanamaker's bill, the garage bill, tires for the Dodge, Yacht Club dues, sewer assessment, taxes. No sooner had he disposed of one of these, or paid something on account, than a fresh bill with a fresh charge or some other project involving expense presented itself, demanding new energy and resources to meet it. Try as he would, and he had Peggy's full coöperation, the bank balance at the end of the month was ever the same; it seemed impossible to save. He used to remind himself of the first months of their marriage, when he and Peggy had never failed to put by something for an amusement or a luxury or to meet a coming expense. Were they ever to know a time of peace and security?

He had grown dull to these considerations within the last year or two, and of late had gone about his work mechanically, indifferently: calling up the engraver to rush Job No. 6739; sending Miss Schwartz over to Gallagher's Studio to have a slipper photographed and to wait for the print; sitting next old Mr. Vonderlies at his desk marking photographs; listening to Madame Blum describe how she wanted the layout of her fashion page; telling excitable Hans Freünd of the composing room "to keep his shirt on," that the cut holding up the forms would be in at four o'clock; telephoning the unpleasant news to the electrotyper that, because of a late advertisement, it would be necessary for him and his crew to work all night; explaining to the ever irate and unsatisfied Max Solomon why the engraving bills were so high that particular month, whose fault it was that the colors on the cover of the last issue had not registered, why a certain cut wanted by an advertiser could not be found, why a charge for tooling a half-tone had been necessary, why he, Bart, wanted a two-dollar raise for Miss Schwartz, why an artist had been employed to hand letter a title instead of using type, why a copyright line had been omitted, why Miss Schwartz wasn't in, why he, Bart, had kept Mr. Solomon waiting when Mr. Solomon had buzzed three times for him . . . .

§ 2

For two weeks now a happy, exhilarating mood had been upon him. He read over his unfinished novel, correcting as he went, rewriting and retyping a page here and there, and he had induced Miss Schwartz to take the battered manuscript home and make a clean copy of it. His story after the interval which had elapsed since he laid it aside, pleased him; he was surprised by its excellence; his heart and mind told him it was good, just how good he dared not speculate. Always, subconsciously, he thought of Mildred Bransom, wondering how she would judge it, how this phrase or that would impress her, weighing her criticisms as he fancied them. Sometimes he could hear himself arguing with her over some point he feared she might not understand, and once going home on the train he broke into a sudden laugh, realizing he had spoken out loud, had actually been gesturing in imagined speech with her.

This happy mood was no new experience. The same kind of elation had come to him before when he had been writing *Almaden,* or more particularly when toiling over the pages of *Quicksilver.* It was these moments of exaltation that stirred him to endeavor, that made him get up early in the mornings, and whipped him on with ink-stained fingers late into the night. When it deserted him, there was only grim determination left to drive him on, forcing him to make his pen travel from line to line, laboriously filling page after page. His present work was a new departure; he believed it had a romantic, adventurous fling; the plot was ingenious. He exulted in the accomplishment, and once more seized every spare moment in which to write. His characters and plot were living in his mind, and he was with them there. Some day, he told himself, *The Hacienda* would be finished, and no publisher would dare refuse it! It was too exciting, too well done!

§ 3

"Hello, Bart? Is that you? . . . . I thought you were going to telephone me one of these days? Didn't you say——"

He cut in with "Hel-*lo,* Mildred!" but his words were confused in a happy breath. He had been thinking of her so continuously in connection with his story during the past fortnight, it was startling to hear her voice. It was a moment or two before he could continue. She spoke again, this time with a slight edge to her tone.

"Oh, I say, Mildred—listen!" he replied in a burst; "I meant to call you, believe me, but I wanted to have something in shape to show you. I've been working like the devil. Oh, indeed I have, ever since we met on the train."

"Splendid. What is it, a short story for us?"

He explained, speaking eagerly, interrupting himself to clap a quick palm over the telephone, and to say hurriedly:

"Miss Schwartz, cut out that damn typing, will you? *Please.*" Then back once more into the instrument:

"I'm plugging away at it, have about six chapters completed, but it will be three times that. It may take me until next summer to finish it. You've no idea what an inspiration you've been; you've stirred me all up."

"Can't I see what you've done?"

"Oh, Mildred, it's in no condition to show yet!"

"I understand, but I'd like to know something about it."

"I haven't worked over it enough yet."

"Nonsense, Bart; don't be a shrinking violet. It doesn't become you."

He laughed. Dear old Mildred! That was just like her!

"Let me see what you've done. I shan't keep it a day. After all, my friend, we must have stories and serials for *Crosby's.*"

"Oh, this isn't anything you'd be interested in," he said quickly. "I can't write popular magazine stuff, and you know it."

"I'm not so sure."

"Truly, Mildred——"

"Will you let me be the judge?"

"Why, of course, only——"

"Listen, Bart," she interrupted, "can't you leave your office a little early this afternoon, say about five? Come up and have tea or a cocktail with me before your train time. We can talk better then, and bring your manuscript."

"It's down at Port——"

"Come anyway, and we can have the cocktail, at least. I'm on Lexington . . . ." She gave the number. "You'll find my name just under the bell; ring three times, will you? Sometimes it's a bill collector or a process server," she laughed, "and I have to protect myself."

"That'd be lovely, Mildred. I'd like to."

"At five, then."

"Okay."

"Be prompt, won't you?"

"On the minute."

§ 4

For the rest of the day, he was conscious of a pleasurable excitement. He rehearsed what he should tell her about his story, how much of the plot, and how he hoped to work it out. If then she insisted on seeing it, well, he'd bring the manuscript up the next day. . . . . A serial? He'd never thought of that. Well, *The Hacienda* might make a good serial; it was that kind of a story. Why not? There was no reason why he shouldn't write a good serial. The first piece of fiction he had ever submitted to *Crosby's* had been a three-part story. And there was good money in serials! Gee, if he could get eight or ten thousand dollars for the serial rights of *The Hacienda* that would take care of both the first and second mortgages and put him and Peggy on Easy Street. He might even feel justified in telling that old curmudgeon, Max Solomon, to go to the devil, and resign from *The Shoe Ægis* for good and all, devoting himself for the rest of his days to writing.

But all this was just crazy dreaming.

If Peggy knew, she'd jolt him out of it.

In any case, there was no need to tell her anything about Mildred's interest or these hopes until they were in a fair way of being realized.

§ 5

On the stroke of five o'clock, he pressed three times the little round brass button above the name "Miss Mildred Bransom," and an immediate answering "Click—click—click" permitted him to enter. A small hallway of white wood, a tall mirror with flanking bronze urns of trailing ivy, a stairway with narrow white banisters and a mahogany rail, Mildred standing at the top of the first short flight, with a welcoming smile and an extended hand.

"You *are* prompt," she said approvingly.

"I'd 've been here before now if I'd dared."

"Wish I'd known. Been home since four."

"That would have been a bit early, but I've been staring into a florist's window at the corner, waiting for the appointed hour."

"Thinking of flowers for Peggy?"

He flushed and stammered a little as he continued:

"I—I was marking time until five o'clock, but I *did* think of flowers, as a matter of fact, and—and they were to have been for you, only I didn't have the price."

"Nice anyhow, Bart; I'll take the will for the deed." She smiled as she led the way toward the open door of her apartment.

The room Bart entered struck him at once as beautiful and gracious. It was not large, but old-fashioned in height and proportions. A coal fire burned in a fireplace of cream-painted brick topped by a thin slab of black oak. Tall curtains of some soft green material hung in generous folds before the windows, shutting out the bleak light of the late winter afternoon and the ugly noises of the street, only a floor below. Here and there a lamp burned warmly. A broad green velvet couch and pillows occupied one wall, and in a corner was a black oak flat-topped desk littered with papers, proofs, and correspondence. The furniture was easy, comfortable; there were no pictures; one beautifully carved Italian framed mirror, flowers. That was all. On a low tile tabouret were waiting a cocktail shaker, ingredients in bottles, a plate of mixed canapés.

"You've done yourself very well, Mildred," Bart said glancing about in admiration, "but I fail to see the what-nots of the late lamented King of Bavaria."

"Fancy you remembering them!" she laughed. "My dear, they all fell to pieces. I spent a fortune gluing them together once a month. . . . . Do sit down."

"You always had an excellent eye," he said; "this room is delightful."

"I like it," she admitted; "I suppose you always do, the places you furnish yourself. The apartment's a good deal larger than I need—fancy a New Yorker saying that!—but it happens to be a fact. There's just my maid and myself here. You don't remember Anastasia, do you? . . . . Of course not. I brought her back with me from Russia; she's been with me ever since, and we're devoted to one another. We only use four rooms, and there are six."

His eye traveled again over the rough-textured ivory-tinted walls, and the effective tall, soft green curtains, so much taller, he noted, than the tops of the windows, and came at length to rest on Mildred herself. She was dressed in silky, lusterless yellow, a simple blouse and pleated skirt, with a shining red patent leather belt hanging loosely about her waist. Effective, the yellow amid so much green, he thought. He had always admired her—her slim ankles and wrists, the smooth column of throat on which her head moved so easily. She was not a pretty woman; handsome, if one stretched for a compliment—handsome with good grooming, nicely done hair and nails, and a lovely clear skin. For him, it was in her vivaciousness, the quick flashes of understanding that her attraction lay. He had never particularly thought about Mildred as a woman; in past years they had been too closely associated with one another in a business way. He had always felt tremendously at ease with her, giving and taking as he would a man; but to-day, for the first time, he was conscious of her feminineness, her charm and pictorial qualities. He noticed she had bobbed her hair. Always a pronounced blonde, he now observed that in the lovely mass that clung close to the nape of her white neck there was a tinge of red. It had probably been put there by a wash or a treatment, but it was definitely becoming.

She had been busying herself with the cocktails, and looking up suddenly, she met his steady inspection.

"Goodness! Whatever does the man find that's wrong about me!" She glanced at her frock and her slim legs as if to ascertain what was amiss, and laughed at his confusion.

"Shake these for me," she bade him, "and let's get down to business. . . . . Try those little square ones, I made them myself . . . . and *do* sit down, or we'll never get started. Thanks. Now make yourself comfy in that armchair. Here's luck to the new book."

They raised the glasses and smiled with their eyes over the rims as they drank.

"G-god, that's delicious!" Bart exclaimed fervently.

"Bacardi with just a touch of lemon and grenadine. It's the imported grenadine that makes it nice. Cigarettes you'll find right there. Now, tell me what you've been writing."

He lay back in the easy chair, twisting the stem of the fragile glass he held between thumb and finger, trying to divert his thoughts from the moment to concentrate on his book. It was difficult to recapture the mood of enthusiasm with which he had been thrilling for the past fortnight, difficult even to remember the thought and emotions of the day, or the things he had planned to tell her about *The Hacienda.* He stumbled and found himself inarticulate.

"I'm describing it very badly," he said, after a little; "all this is so delightful"—he waved his hand about the room—"and this is so delicious"—he raised the half-emptied glass—"that I can't give myself a fair break. I live in a cold, hard climate, and this is all too languorous and gracious."

He found an odd kind of encouragement in her silence, and began again, telling her about the old building of the hacienda itself at the foot of the abandoned quicksilver mines, as he remembered it, the adobe walls, the mammoth kitchen in the basement, the empty rooms upstairs, the great reception room with the two mother-of-pearl-faced fireplaces installed sixty, perhaps seventy-five, years ago, the Chinese pagoda—a summer-house, reported to have cost half a million, which had been a present from a visiting mandarin in appreciation of royal entertainment—the gardens, the lake with trailing willows drooping over the water, the swans—progeny of some graceful-necked ancestors who had delighted the eyes of Spanish señoritas half a century ago—the splashing fountains, the dilapidated stagecoach that had once rumbled behind prancing steeds champing upon silver bits, while vaqueros cleared the way and a soft-eyed girl peered from behind its silk curtains and dreamed of moonlight, the music of a guitar, and the lilting voice of a swaggering hidalgo . . . .

"And my mother ran away from all that," he paused to say, "to marry my father and start a cattle ranch in an arid wilderness."

Mildred nodded, her eyes fixed upon his face, and he picked up his story again, trying to make her see the unfenced reaches of Los Robles, the grazing lands beyond, Guadalupe Meadows, Rincón de Romas—the dream the itinerant miner, his father burdened with a wife and two small babies, had dreamed and made a reality. Digressing, he told her of other great cattle kings in early California history, Miller and Lux, Haggin and Carr, who had established vast domains for their roaming herds, principalities which included mountains and valleys, cities even, and the better part of entire counties.

"That Bakersfield situation and the scrap between those two giant cattle-owning companies would make an immense story, one of the most thrilling ever written. Why, one of them—I think it was Haggin and Carr—hired six hundred men in San Francisco, brought them down secretly on a special train, set them to work, and changed the whole course of Kern River overnight——"

"Well, *write* it," Mildred burst in, unable to contain herself; "my God, Bart, there's the material at your finger tips and you're the man of all men qualified to do it."

All her feminineness and sex consciousness were forgotten now; she was the editor, eager, intense, excited. Thumping one small fist into the palm of her other hand, she sprang up and fell to pacing the room.

At one of the front windows, she halted abruptly, drew aside the curtains, and stared out into the cold, blue street. Bart fell silent. He was gratified by the effect of what he had been telling her. Sipping his cocktail, he gazed comfortably into the fire, and she came presently to stand beside him, a hand upon the black oak mantel, and let her eyes find with his the charred and glowing coals. When she began to speak, it was with obvious restraint.

"You're a very foolish person," she said; "you have a talent for expression quite beyond the ordinary. I think you can write as well and in many cases a great deal better than a number who are basking in the literary limelight to-day. You have this wealth of material ready to hand which you have the foresight to appreciate, and yet you fritter away your time and talents on a shoe magazine and—and—on commuting . . . ."

Bart laughed.

"What would you have me do, my dear?"

"Do? Do?" Her impatience broke out once more. "I don't know what I'd do, but I'd do *something!*" She paused, collecting herself. "Bart," she went on again in a quieter key, "you're exceptional, I believe; you have great potentialities. I don't know, perhaps it's only instinct, but I've learned to depend upon that instinct, and it tells me that you can write if you want to. I think you might go very far with your pen. You're too modest. . . . . No, it isn't modesty," she interrupted herself to say; "it's more that you underestimate your ability. You are throwing away your life on a shoe magazine and a bunch of thankless, unappreciative children——"

"Oh, come!" he protested.

"I'm speaking impersonally, of course. I know how you must love every hair of their heads, and I know what joy and satisfaction you get out of them, but I'm talking from the point of view of the world. Who cares whether you have children or not, who cares whether you're married or aren't? The world—the world of art—cares only what you contribute to it. Isn't achievement in letters comparable to achievement in begetting children? Isn't it perhaps more? . . . . I don't know, I'm only asking. How many people to-day know whether or not Goethe or Beethoven or Carlyle had children? Who knows or cares? It's what they left in thought and beauty that counts——"

"Mildred, Mildred," he interrupted, "you're talking as if I were some sort of a genius!"

"Genius or not, I don't care; that's not the point. The point is that you can *write,* and by your pen you can win wealth, fame, and contentment. You can be happy and free, if you want to, escape from this awful prison into which life has thrown you, rid yourself of these terrible, clanking chains which bind you hand and foot."

The force with which she spoke silenced her. His thoughts spun in a whirlwind. . . . . Right, was she? Was it so? The taut strings of the harp within his soul hummed to her voice. . . . . How he *wanted* to believe her!

The stillness between them grew, and then, as if some timepiece within him, sounding a warning note, communicated itself to him, he reached for his watch. Instantly he was upon his feet.

"Good God, Mildred, it's quarter to six, and I wanted to catch that six o'clock train. Peggy'll scalp me!"

"But what about the story, Bart?"

"What story?"

"The Hacienda."

"Ah, yes . . . . that."

"When may I see it?"

"It's not finished."

"Yes, yes, I know, but I want to read what you've done."

"Well . . . . ah . . . ."

"Come Saturday and have lunch with me. Can you? Your office is closed that afternoon. You can spend the afternoon here and read me as much as you've written."

"All right, that's fine."

"At one—on Saturday?"

"At one, I'll be here. Good-bye, Mildred—this has been wonderful. You've got me all boiled up! It's rotten to have to rush away like this—but you know! Peggy'll scalp me . . . ."

§ 6

He missed the six o'clock train, and the next left half an hour later. He walked into his home at twenty-five minutes past seven. Peggy and the children were at the table, finishing the dessert. Apologizing and explaining he had been detained at the office, he sat down at his place. Peggy, he saw, was annoyed. Kate backed open the swing door from the pantry, her hands full, to set his coffee and his dinner plate before him with two indifferent thumps. Even the children understood he was out of favor.

He made an effort.

"I'm truly sorry, Peggy; I just couldn't get away. Solomon came in, wanted me to get some photographs over to the engravers' at the last moment."

She was in one of her prim, baffling moods, determined to say nothing that was unpleasant, yet wishing him to understand nevertheless she was angry with him. She avoided addressing him, giving her whole attention to the children, asking the boys questions about their geography and history lessons, explaining the spectrum in detail to all the children and telling them what colors composed it.

To-night Bart was indifferent to her coldness. He was still under the spell of Mildred Bransom's words, and his mind was upon his book. He had been thinking about it coming down on the train, determined he would work at it as never before, planning how to develop his characters, strengthen its plot.

He was on fire to begin. All his creative instinct was on tiptoe. He felt he could write, thousands and thousands of words, and write at his best. If Peggy was sore at him, it was too bad. He really did not care whether she was angry with him or not; he wanted to go to his study and work; he wanted to write!

And write he did, page after page after page, until his fingers were stained to the knuckles with ink, and the pen grew dry and made meaningless scratches at the paper because he would not pause long enough to dip the point in the well.

Upstairs, feet pounded; he heard the bang of a falling chair, there was a splintering smash of some heavier object, the baby awoke with a wail. He was not disturbed. Words and sentences flowed in a stream; it was exciting to record them.

Toward ten o'clock, Kate returned from her visit to the Hollow, stamping her feet on the back porch, banging shut the storm door to the kitchen entrance, securing it with its rattling chain, as was her custom. Mounting heavily, she ascended the rear stairs. The tub was being filled in the bathroom; he could hear the plunge of water from the faucets. The house grew cold; his forgotten cigarette burned the edge of the desk, raising a smell of scorched varnish. Once he thought he heard Peggy calling. He wrote on—he was in his big scene—the drama of it was developing better than he had even hoped.

From sheer exhaustion his pen dropped at length from his cramped, stained fingers. He leaned forward, elbows on the desk, burying his face in his hands, and remained so for a long time, resting from his efforts, drawing a deep breath now and then, waiting until normalcy returned. He rose stiffly then, straightening his aching back, and glancing at the clock saw, with surprise and satisfaction, it was nearly one o'clock. For a moment or two he still lingered, standing before his desk, looking at the inky, scratched pages of his manuscript, flicking over one or two of them, reviewing what he had written.

"If she doesn't think that's good," he said under his breath, "I'm just cuckoo, and I might as well stick at being the art editor of a shoe magazine."

After he had tiptoed upstairs, he remembered he had forgotten the furnace and tiptoed down again, finding his way by the back stairs to the basement, where he flung several shovelfuls of coal upon the dying embers.

Once more above, he undressed by the light from the bathroom flooding the hall, extinguished this, and wearily but happily got into bed.

Tired though he was, he could not find sleep at once. His story, with its plot and characters, went around and around in his brain. He lay on his back, hands clasped across his breast, and gave himself up to them, staring into the blackness above.

A sound startled him.

"Peggy?"

He was on his elbow in a moment, trying to make out her face across the space which separated their beds. He had no answer, but something told him the noise had come from her. He got out of bed, bent over her, and gently touched her shoulder.

"Peggy?"

He knew then she was awake and had been crying.

"Dearest, dearest," he implored, "what *is* it? What's the matter?" He was on his knees on the hard floor, his arm across her shoulders, trying to see her face in the darkness.

"What is it, darling?' he entreated. "Tell Bart. . . . . For God's sake, sweetheart, tell me what's troubling you?"

He put out his hand and touched her face. It was wet with tears. With a jerk he pulled back the bed covers and got in beside her, his arms about her, murmuring loving phrases, petting her. He had forgotten about his lateness at dinner; he could not imagine what it was that distressed her.

He had it finally—a long, unhappy tale of how she had gone down to the corner with the children to wait for him about the time his train was due, because that was the way she did when they were first married and he used to walk up the Avenue from the office to meet her, and she and the children had waited and waited for him there in the cold, and when he hadn't been on his usual train, they had waited for the next, and then, when he hadn't been on that, they had come home and found Kate in one of her tantrums because she had been kept waiting, and then one word led to another, and finally Kate said she wouldn't stay another day, and Peggy didn't know whether she was quitting in the morning or not. And it had all been because he hadn't telephoned! Why *hadn't* he telephoned? What was a telephone for? It was so easy to telephone! Just say "I'll be home a little late to-night, dear," because that would have saved everybody's feelings. It was the only decent thing to have done, anyhow. It had been a lovely dinner, and all spoiled, and so naturally he hadn't said a word about it, and she had made those peas, cooked with bacon, he always liked so much . . . .

And *then* what had he done? Shut himself up in his stupid old study without a word to say to any of them, not even to the boys when they wanted to kiss him good-night, not even when she had called and called! What kind of a life did he think she lived, anyway? It was just one petty detail after another, cooking and rinsing diapers and making beds, mending and darning, working, working, working from morning until night just so the house would look pretty and be in order, and the children clean and well behaved, so that when he came home he'd find something pleasant to come home to, and if he didn't appreciate how much work there was to do, she'd like him to try it for one day—just for *one* day—and if he didn't love her any more she might just as well take the children and go back to the ranch, because she only did it for him, and there was no sense in her slaving herself to death if he didn't care anything about his home, his children, or herself . . . .

She was crying now, her anger passed. Her head was on his shoulder, his arm beneath and about her, and, physically tired though he was, he thrilled to the softness and sweetness of her as she lay close to him.

His lips found her hair, and, pressing her to him, he told her how he loved her, how dear and sweet she was, and how he would willingly cut off his right hand rather than have her unhappy for a single minute.

Around and about them spread the cold darkness of the night, with the icy breath of out of doors stirring the curtains at the wide flung window. In their rooms close at hand, their children lay safely asleep, and from the one immediately adjoining, Kate's guttural breathing rose and fell rhythmically.

Warm and happy and restored to peace once more, they clung together beneath the covers, arms entwined, breast to breast, and longing rose like a white hot flame in each of their hearts. Hugging, straining, their breath quickening, they yearned for one another, battling within themselves the age-old struggle between duty and desire.

And into Bart's ear came Peggy's soft whisper:

"I'll have another baby, if you want me to, darling."

Something seemed to clutch him by the throat; it was as if a giant hand had grasped him there. He swallowed, opening his eyes, staring into the night.

"Now—now," he said to himself, "now's the time to think—now's the time to weigh consequences . . . . not later . . . ."

Thoughts, swift, flashing: his novel, Mildred, serial rights, debts, hopes, future, Eva Ann, himself, Peggy, the children . . . .

"Now—*now* is the time to weigh consequences . . . . not later!"

He made himself see a picture: Peggy coming to him—here in their bedroom or down there in the study—gazing at him with a frightened starry, swimming look, and telling him, perhaps with a hand of sympathy on his arm, thinking only of what the unpleasant news was to mean to him, another baby was on the way!

He gulped, pushing her away from him, gritting his teeth.

"Peg, Peg—we mustn't, we can't! That's all there is about it! We're just unlucky. We *can't* have another baby! . . . . Oh, help me, Peg; gee whilikens, you know I want you!"

She lay passively for a little, and then, with all the warmth of arms and body, she drew him to her.

He lay against her, panting, eyes fiercely shut, teeth clenched, hands knotted into fists.

"The Hacienda!" he thought; *"The Hacienda!"*

In his mind, the characters of his story rose before him; they seemed to be looking at him reproachfully, like people drowning. He thought of what it would mean to abandon them. Friends,—confident, trusting loyal friends—deserted! He thought of the curling pages of his manuscript of *Quicksilver* in the red flames of the furnace.

He groaned and sank his teeth into his lip.

Catching Peggy harshly by the shoulder, he pushed her from him violently.

"Listen, Peg . . . . We're going crazy! Damn it! You'll regret this like *anything* to-morrow morning. We don't *dare* go through with it. Peggy darling, we love each other, and God intended we should enjoy each other. This kind of business can't go on for the rest of our lives! Can't you see that? It's just killing us both! . . . . Oh, my God, Peg, I want you so . . . ."

Once more he fought with himself.

"Peg, Peg," he cried in anguish, "why, *why* won't you let me ask Doc Adams to talk to you? Why won't you listen to reason and follow his advice? Just let him talk to you for half an hour . . . ."

He stopped. At once he felt a cold wind blowing between them. He could feel Peggy's head next his own upon the pillow gently and firmly shaking. He knew her lips were set. She moved away.

A sigh of great weariness escaped him.

"Very well," he said quietly; "if you won't, you won't. I don't know what's to become of us. . . . . Good-night, dear; I'll go back to bed."

He reached out with his lips in the dark and found her ear, a corner of her cheek. He kissed and left her.

CHAPTER IV

§ 1

THE table was daintily set and stood near the two front windows. It was round, a lace tablecloth covered it, and Anastasia came in and placed a great bowl of violets in its center. A fire burned in the coal grate; outside the street was bathed in sparkling winter sunshine. The tall green curtains had been pushed back, and daylight filtered through diaphanous sheer ones of a more delicate green next the casement, and the ivory walls and contents of the room were tinged with emerald tints. Bart and Mildred sat in easy chairs before the fire, finishing their cocktails.

"Mighty pleasant," he said, setting his emptied glass on the tile tabouret between them. "I've been looking forward all week to this afternoon."

"I've been looking forward to it, too," Mildred admitted. "Did you lose your scalp the other night, as you feared?"

"Oh, yes, but I didn't mind. I was too thoroughly excited about the marvelous things you had been telling me, and I was crazy to get to work."

"And did you?"

"You bet; till midnight and later. I've been getting up every morning at five, freezing to death, incidentally, but putting in a couple of hours before train time. I've even been doing a little now and then down at the office."

"Fine work, Bart; I'm glad I stirred you up. You brought the manuscript with you?"

"I have it over there with my hat and coat."

"We'll get at it directly after lunch. You'll read it?"

"If you like."

"You don't have to go early?"

"No. Peggy won't expect me until the usual weekday time."

"I've been thinking so much about you and your work since you were here."

"Have you? Well, I've been thinking a lot about it, too. Thanks to you."

"You've nothing to thank me for."

"Oh, haven't I? Mildred—I think I've been happier these past three weeks than I've been since . . . . oh, I can't remember. A long time, anyway."

"Why, aren't you happy, Bart? I thought you and Peggy——"

"Oh, we *are*. It isn't that. It's this damned groove I'm in——"

"Hole, you mean."

"Perhaps. My life's dull as dish water. It's this interest in writing that's suddenly given me pep."

"Let me fill your glass. I won't say dividend! How I hate big, fat brokers who come up to you shaking the shaker, saying that."

"Do you often dine with big, fat brokers?"

He eyed her speculatively.

"Not if I can help it." She filled his glass and her own.

"If you mean," she went on, "do I allow big, fat brokers to take me out to dinner, I can assure you I don't. If I could find entertainment in that sort of thing, I'd go in a minute. But I *do* dine out occasionally with friends, married folk, understand, and it's when my host comes up to me, offering to refill my glass, and says, 'Have a little dividend?' that I shudder. Well, come to lunch. 'Stasia's glaring at me. I suppose things are spoiling in the oven. Sit there, will you, Bart?"

The table, the room, the prospect of luncheon, the companionship, all were charming. A feeling of exhilaration, of well-being came to him. He relished his clams and the cup of thick, savory soup as they were set before him. Chianti was served from a straw-cased bottle in thin green-tinted wineglasses. All the glassware on the table was green. He admired it, and Mildred told him she had bought it at Wanamaker's.

"You always make me talk about myself," he said, after a while; "you never say a word about *your*self or what you are doing these days, I mean of special importance."

"What would you like to know?"

"Probably the things you wouldn't care to tell me."

"I don't believe you'd find even those interesting."

"Try it."

"Well, would you be interested to know that I've just learned my mother's probably dying?"

"Oh, Mildred! I'm sorry!"

"You needn't be. She's past seventy, and as long as she doesn't suffer, I shan't worry. You see, she's been losing her mind for the past few years. She lives with my married sister in Mansfield, Ohio. Ever been in Mansfield, Ohio?"

"No."

"Then, don't go."

"I didn't know you *had* a mother, Mildred."

"Oh, yes, I'm like everybody else. Minerva, Adam, and Eve are the exceptions, I believe. Can you think of any others?"

He asked about *Crosby's;* it always interested him to hear bits of gossip from the old organization.

"Don't suppose I'd know a single one of the staff now," he observed.

"You remember Pat Costello? Used to be in the advertising department? He married that pretty Patterson girl in the front office."

"And Mr. Crosby?"

"About the same, although he seems lost in our new offices. You haven't seen them? Oh, you must; we're sumptuous."

He thought of the gloomy halls, and the dingy outlook from the windows of *The Shoe Ægis*. She broke in with:

"Don't be mooning over what's past and gone. You did what you thought was right at the time. I suppose Mr. Crosby resents it to this day. I'll admit it would have been pleasant if you'd stayed."

"We'd have been seeing each other every day, probably fighting over articles or stories and editorial policies."

"I'm not so sure. We never used to disagree."

There was something in her tone that made him look up. She was absently stirring her empty bouillon cup with a spoon.

"My dear," he said quickly, "of course we never used to disagree, and, please God, we'll be of the same mind about this story of mine."

"Then you *do* think it's good?"

"I didn't say that."

"But you like it?"

He considered, hesitating.

"Truly, I can't tell. I'm terribly interested in my people, and I think the story is romantic and has plenty of action and speed. My characters seem very much alive to me. That's all I can say."

A marvelous-looking dish appeared, made of stewed chicken, pink carrots, onions, round potatoes, and half-a-dozen other kinds of vegetables, submerged in thin, rich brown gravy.

"One of 'Stasia's recipes. Her mother used it. They came from Elizavetgrad. She's had a perfectly amazing history. Some day I'll have to tell you about her. My God, if *she* could write!"

The fire settled with a tiny crash in the grate, and Mildred motioned to him, as he moved, not to replenish it. The room was warm, the day scintillating, the wine pleasant, the food delicious. Crackers and ripe cheese appeared, with coffee and a chaste decanter containing a colorless liquid.

"Vodka," Mildred enlightened him, grasping the bottle by its thin neck. "Have you ever tasted it?"

"Never."

"It's like brandy. You mustn't sip it. Toss it off; that's the proper way. Try it, I don't believe you'll like it. I have it for the coffee. Coffee without vodka is vile."

He tipped a small glassful down his throat and pronounced it excellent.

"You should have waited until after you'd finished your coffee; I'm afraid it will spoil it."

"Marvelous," he said, meaning the hour, the luncheon, and her company. She understood.

"You have no idea how much I'm alone," she told him, looking thoughtfully over the rim of the coffee cup at her lips.

"I sit here night after night, and not a soul comes in," she continued. "Saturdays and Sundays are hell. I have to think up things to do to distract myself. I don't mind weekday nights so much. 'Stasia always has a nice dinner for me; she knows just what I can eat and what I like—and I sit here by the fire, if there *is* one, and generally have a magazine or two to look through to see what a deadly rival is doing. I have manuscripts to read too."

"Do you still have to plow through all the trash that comes in?"

"Oh, no. We have two regular readers now, but I have to decide what we're going to buy and what we aren't. Of course, the final decision rests with Mr. Crosby. Then, usually I have work I can't very well do in the office. So many interruptions, you know. At best, it's lonesome. Sometimes I threaten to get a woman friend to come in here with me."

"Why don't you?"

"Brrrr-rr! I'm afraid; I'd rather be lonely than bored."

"How is it you never married, Mildred?"

He asked the question casually, but immediately she flushed to the eyebrows, warm color flooding her face. They both laughed.

"You certainly thrust me through that time," she said, finger tips pressed to either cheek.

"How is it I've never married?" she repeated, when she had collected herself. "Well, I'll tell you. I've always been in love with the wrong man. It was Will Ohrstrom for a long time, and then I had an affair with a Russian officer—the one I told you about—in a rather feeble attempt to get over my infatuation with Will, and then . . . . after that . . . . after that, there was you."

"Me!" His eyes flashed to her face.

"Oh, years and years ago. I sort of fell for you from the very beginning. I remember it began the day I rented my little apartment to you and Peggy. I fancy it was the romance the two of you represented, and your mad infatuation with her that appealed to me at first. After I sailed I found myself thinking about you a lot, and then Alexis came along and occupied my thoughts. When I was back at the office, there was you again. I'm afraid I had a terrible case on you for a while—and, oh, wasn't I jealous of Peggy! You never suspected of course, and I was in terror you'd find out. I remember one day you were sick, and telephoned you were going to stay in bed and that Peggy would look after you . . . . My dear, I had to go home too, I got crying so . . . ."

"Mildred!"

"Oh, I'm all over it now, and you may tell Peggy all about it, if you want to. I rather think she suspected. I caught her looking at me awfully funnily one day when she came down to the office to keep an appointment with you. I haven't an idea how she guessed, but women don't need to be told such things. You may tell her all about it now, if you want to. There have been a number since! Oh, I'm frightfully impressionable. I guess I'm an awful fool, Bart. I have a regular high-school girl's crush right this minute on a young man in our advertising department. I don't even know his name, and all he does is to lift his hat and bow to me when we meet in the hall or elevator, and blush the way I did a moment ago, because he knows I'm the managing editor. . . . . Bart, I'll have just a taste of that vodka."

He filled the tiny green glass she held towards him.

"Thanks. Fill your own. . . . . I'm an awful fool. He has one of those Arrow collar faces and big square shoulders. Oh, I'm sure he was a football player at Yale!

"Come, sit over here by the fire," she continued in a moment. "There's no heat in it, but it's something to look at. Sit there where the light will come over your shoulder when you read. We mustn't forget the book. After all, that's what you're up here for."

§ 2

But they did forget it. Their talk ran on from one subject to another—on and on and on. Twice they spoke of the novel, and Bart even got so far as to bring the binder that held the manuscript. But for the rest of the afternoon, he sat with it unopened on his knees. They spoke of books and writers and themselves; they spoke of publishers and magazines and themselves; they spoke of things and people and themselves. The afternoon fled at a gallop. It was a shock suddenly to discover it was growing dark and that a blue dusk filled the street. Bart was astonished in glancing at his watch to find it close to five.

He rose to his feet.

"In God's name," he exclaimed earnestly, "what has happened to the time? I'd 've sworn, Mildred, it was not more than three! My dear, the afternoon's been perfectly *wonderful.*"

He took her hand and patted it affectionately, trying to look his appreciation.

"I'm sorry about the story," he went on, "but I wouldn't have missed a word of our talk. Forgive me for saying it again, but it's been simply *wonderful.*"

She looked soberly into his eyes, her hand clinging to his, and then she smiled. It was a slow smile but a happy one.

"I'll read it to-night and write you about it before I go to bed."

"Oh, don't do that. I shouldn't get your letter until Monday. Better send it to the office, for, if it goes to Port, I shan't have it until Monday night, and, of course, I'm crazy to know what you think. And you *will* be truthful, won't you, Mildred? You won't let our friendship bias you in its favor, will you? Promise me, Mildred. I'm counting on you. It wouldn't be kind or right to encourage me. You're the final judge, you know."

"I promise," she said, still looking up at him.

"You see, it would be absurd for me to go on plugging and hoping I might put something across, if there really wasn't any use. *You* know. *You* can tell me."

"I'll give you the honest truth, even if it hurts you."

"That's what I want, Mildred; that's all I ask. . . . . It's been wonderful, Mildred, simply *wonderful.* . . . ."

"It *has* been nice."

"Can't we do it again?"

"That's up to you. *I* have no home ties."

"Well, I *must* come to see you. It's been—oh, I don't know—it's just been heaven—the lunch, the afternoon, you! You don't know what all this peace and quiet and beauty and understanding mean to me. I don't get it—I don't get *any* of it! It's like breathing my own air up here, it's like being in the country where I belong——

"Oh, my God, I forgot the coffee! Peggy asked me to stop at Charles's and bring home a can of that special brand! I shan't have time now to catch the five-twenty——

"There you are! You see how it is? Coffee and sugar and a box of eggs, or a dozen apples, a bottle of cream! 'Stop and get them on your way home!' That's my life, Mildred; that's the way I have to spend my time; that's the kind of thing continually I have to be doing instead of pushing a pen the way I want——"

"Oh, Bart, don't I know!"

"And here it's glorious heaven for me—glorious heaven just to sit quietly before a fire and talk with somebody who speaks my language. I haven't had Max Solomon bellowing at me, or the children nagging or bawling or wanting this or that or God knows what . . . .

"You *have* to let me come again, Mildred!"

"My dear boy, you can come whenever you want to, and as often as you like. I told you it was up to you."

"All right, then, I'll come. And I shall count the hours all to-night and all day to-morrow, waiting for your Monday morning letter. . . . . I've got to run. Good-bye, my dear."

Simply and unaffectedly, he put his arm about her shoulders and kissed her.

"Good-bye, my dear," he said again, catching up overcoat and hat; "whatever you tell me, be *honest.*"

He ran down the stairs, threw open the door below, and hurried off in the direction of the subway.

§ 3

"Solomon kept me all afternoon," he said to Peggy as he flourished his napkin and sat down at the dinner table later that same evening. He was in the gayest of spirits. "The old boy had some diagrams of stock-taking sheets for a retail shoe dealer he wanted included in the next issue, and I had to get hold of an artist to draw them. . . . . Well, boys, suppose it's the movies to-night? What's the name of the picture, Dan?"

"Oh, something or other . . . . I don't know."

"You couldn't go, Daddy, could you?"

"No, I've got to work to-night."

"Well, if you're going to stay home, do you mind if I took the girls?"

"Certainly not, Peg; go ahead. I'll leave the study door open, and if he cries, I'll hear him. . . . . By the way, Mildred Bransom telephoned to-day."

"Mildred did? What for?"

"She wanted to know if I'd write something for her."

"For her?"

"For *Crosby's*."

"A short story?"

"Oh, yes—something like that."

"Well, why don't you?"

"Perhaps I will. I'm working on that novel just at present." Silence. Peggy was fixing Margaret's baked potato, mashing it with a fork, adding butter and a little salt and pepper.

"I don't see why you don't do it. If she wants a short story and cares enough to ring you up, you might sell her something. A couple of hundred would come in awfully handy right now, Bart."

"Guess it would. Say, I forgot the coffee; I'm terribly sorry."

"Oh, that's all right. Maybe there's enough for to-morrow morning, but if there isn't we can stop on our way back from church, and borrow some from the Westovers. . . . . Do you like Mildred, Bart?"

"Yes, I think so."

"She always seemed a sort of scheming person to me.—Johnny, put that down this minute; you'll spill it!—I suppose you have to be nice to her."

"I ought to, if there's a chance of her buying a story."

"I don't believe she has any intention of doing any such thing."

"Oh, why not?"

"Because . . . ."

"What do you mean 'because'?"

"Well, never mind. Perhaps I'm wrong. She impresses me as being awfully insincere. . . . . Listen, Bart, I want to have the Five Hundred Club here next Saturday night. Is that all right with you? I'll just have coffee and cake and ice cream. We've been to nearly all the others' houses, and Leelee phoned to-day to say she couldn't have us at her house next week because . . . ."

§ 4

Mildred's letter:

"Bart dear! I think you've written a capital story. It moves, it has plenty of action, you have captured that ephemeral

> something *romance*. I congratulate you. If you go on as you've begun, I am certain Mr. Crosby will want it. Don't make it too long—that's all I urge. One or two points I'd like to discuss with you before you go much further. When can I see you?"

As he read the words, he realized how much store he had set upon her opinion. He reached with a hand that trembled a little for the bulky telephone directory, looked up *Crosby's* new number, and in a few moments had its managing editor on the line.

"I'm so thrilled, Mildred, I don't know what to do! You do like it, don't you? You're not kidding me?"

"I like it more than I dared allow myself to say in that letter. Oh, Bart, I like it so much I'm in terror for fear you'll spoil it! It's splendid! If you'll *only* keep going! That's what I want to see you about."

"When shall it be?"

"Well, I don't know . . . ."

"How about this afternoon?"

"All right with me. Come early, can you?"

"A little after four? I'll tell 'em down here I have to catch a four-thirty train."

"Fine! I'll do the same!"

They laughed at their scheming.

§ 5

On his way to the appointment, he found himself smiling broadly at his fellow subway passengers, and when he took Mildred's hand at the top of the short flight from the street door, it was all he could do to keep from putting his arms about her. Dear Mildred! She certainly was good. . . . . She was just *wonderful!*

The purring, smiling fire again, the drawn green curtains, the tile tabouret with the silver shaker and fragile green-tinted glasses, little crackers this time covered with melted cheese.

"Perfect, Mildred! I've been excited all day over the prospect of coming up. I love it. And you honestly like the Magnum Opus?"

She told him again how well she liked it, wanted at once to know how he proposed to finish it. When he told her, she clapped her hands like a child, then impulsively reached out to take hold of his own. He caught and held hers, and a current began to flow between them through the contact—a current, growing swifter and stronger as their fingers continued to cling together. Bart had to look away. He was fully conscious of her now, conscious of her femininity, warmth, and personality, of how much he was drawn to her.

"I'll work," he said; "I'll do my damnedest."

He let go her hands, looked into the fire, his face frowning. In the ensuing silence, the current that had flowed between them began to flow again. A feeling of repose, of relaxation and peace came to him; he could not remember having experienced anything quite like it before. Just to be there—just to be sitting near her—just to be able to look at her if he wished—seemed at the moment completely to satisfy him.

The silence lengthened; neither was disposed to break it. At last, both stirred simultaneously, Bart to reach for a cigarette, Mildred to fill the glasses.

"Well," she said with a long breath, "here's to *The Hacienda*." He rose to touch her glass with his.

They discussed then the length of the story, where it should be broken into installments, when it could be finished.

"June, if I work hard," he told her.

"That would be too late for fall publication. I'll run it in the spring."

"My dear, do you really think . . . . ?"

"I'll tell you, Bart, I thought I'd ask Mr. Crosby to read it without saying who wrote it. He may be prejudiced against you, I don't know. But, oh, I'm certain he's going to like it. It's a corking good story!"

Again that leap of current. It was like electricity. Bart had a momentary giddiness; the blood beat up into his neck, and he felt it throbbing in his temples. He reached for a chair back.

"Well," he said, clearing his throat, "I guess I'd better be going."

"Yes," she said.

He offered his hand, and when he had her fingers, held them a moment. He dared not look at her. Picking up hat and coat, he stood before the door.

"Well," he said again, "I'll be on my way. I'm going to work very hard; like blazes. I'll let you know how I'm getting along."

"Yes, do," she said; "I'll be interested."

He laid his hand on the door knob.

"See you sometime soon, eh?" He shot her a quick interrogating glance.

"Ring me up," she said.

"All right; I'll do that . . . ."

Still he hesitated. He felt it was more than he could do to leave that room, that fire!

He wrenched open the door.

"Good-bye," he said. He walked out into the hall and started down the stairs. On the third tread, he stopped and looked up at her as she stood in the apartment doorway. She rested there with her head against the framework, the finger tips of one hand touching her cheek, the emerald tints of the room behind her making a soft, warm halo about her head.

He looked a long moment, then waved his hat and went down the stairs without speaking.

§ 6

On the glaringly lighted suburban train bound for Port Washington, he found a seat next the window. His manuscript in its canvas-covered binder was tucked in beside him; an evening paper lay in his gloved hand. He was tempted to look at neither. He felt curiously composed. His thoughts were of Mildred—of himself. Nothing very definite. His mind lingered on the room with the tall green curtains, the red embers in the grate, the tile tabouret with the shaker and glasses, and dwelt on the girlish figure which moved before and about them. He shrank from analysis. If he was conscious of anything at all, it was that the room and the fire and the woman were not for him. He must not go there again; the friendship, so pleasant, companionable, and stimulating, must end. It was over; he was done with it. He felt like a man who had been enjoying the sunshine and had been ordered back to the house. The sunshine was not good for him. All the excitement of the past few weeks was gone. His interest in his work, in continuing with *The Hacienda,* was dead. He had no desire to write another line. Depression rode him in its place. He must go on in the same old rut, he thought darkly: his home, where he was never at peace. Solomon, the Five Hundred Club, insurance premiums, mortgage interest, debts, worry. There was no beauty anywhere.

It was snowing when he reached Port Washington. Feathery white flakes were falling. All the ugliness of the icy, dirty, sooty ground, usually revealed by station, street, and store lights, had been obliterated. A muffled stillness spread itself through the night. A taxi driver spoke to him, offering a remaining seat in a car bound in the direction of his home, but Bart preferred to walk. He chose a way by back streets, kicking the soft snow before him as he trudged along, lifting his face now and then to the delicate caress of the silently falling flakes.

Home seemed an unfamiliar place to which to come. It was warm within the house. The children all rushed at him to be kissed, the smaller ones clasping him about the knees. Peggy was hurrying back and forth between kitchen and dining room, setting the last of the table, the pantry door flopping to and fro at each of her hurried passages. She called cheerfully to him and set the butter dish where it belonged. He was too weary to go upstairs to wash; he sat down at the table and waited for the meal to be ready.

"Tired, old man?" she asked solicitously, and kissed him as she passed, with a swift skidding kiss on his hair.

Daddy—Daddy—Daddy—blaa-bla-bla-bla—ding, ding, ding—bang, bang, bang—bzzzzzzzzz——

"Hello, Johnny, what you got there?"

"Oh, it's a scooter a guy made at school."

"I see . . . ."

Bang, bang, bang—blaa-bla-bla-bla-bla—bzzzzzzzzz——

"Din-*ner,* children! Come on, all of you. Put that away, Johnny. . . . . Dan, did you hear Mother?"

They were irrepressible with chatter—the boys about the new fall of snow, about school and friends, and tobogganing over in the Hacket Estates; the girls about their teacher, a French song they were learning, a fairy play they were rehearsing, about wands and gold-paper stars, and a dead bird found in the snow; Peggy about what the children ate and how they ate it, about Johnny's rubber boots, and for him to try to remember where he had left them, about colored tissue paper which would do just as well for the fairy dresses as cambric or cheesecloth.

Bart looked about the table, his eyes traveling from face to face. They seemed like strangers to him, people who did not belong to him nor he to them, queer folk with queer ideas.

He drank his coffee and left them to their chocolate pudding, while Peggy scolded them to pass each other the cream and sugar, and to look out for one another's wants.

At his desk in the study Bart opened his manuscript and read over the last chapter he had written. When he had finished, he picked up his pen and began slowly to continue. It was the old laborious task of adding word to word, sentence to sentence. Joy was gone; facility of expression had deserted him. Between his eyes and the white page came the vision of the room with the tall, green curtains, the fire snickering in the grate, the tabouret, the woman of the fair hair with its tinge of red who understood . . . . that was it, who understood . . . .

"Hell," he said to himself, and bit the end of his penholder. He stared at a row of books on the opposite wall for idle minutes. A pounding overhead. He heard a squeal of delight from the girls and Peggy's warning. "I'll punish you, children, if you wake the baby!"

He shook himself, tried to concentrate. Presently the thought came to him that some day Mildred would read what he wrote. She was depending on this story, she wanted it for a serial, a serial in the spring of 1921. His hand began to move faster, words commenced to form themselves. Yes, he must write his best. He might not write *to* her, but he could write *for* her!

Absorbed, he was hardly conscious of Peggy's entrance. She sat down in an armchair near the light and began fussing, making something. There was a good deal of rustling going on; vaguely he was aware it was the paper fairy costumes.

She said: "I hope this doesn't disturb you, dear. The rest of the house seems so cold and lonesome to-night."

He heard her; he did not hear her.

He went on writing. His thoughts were flowing in order now, the words marshaling themselves, falling dutifully in line, forming rank upon rank, marching down the white page.

Coming to the end of a chapter, he drew a line, threw down his pen, and covered his face with his hands as he always did when spent.

"I don't see why you tire yourself so, dearest, with all this night work when you use up so much of your energy during the day," Peggy was saying. "Is all this writing truly necessary, Bart? We, the children and I, see so little of you. Seems to me I'm always shushing them with 'Quiet, children, Daddy's trying to work.' Heavenly day, Bart, children are children, and they have to play, and when you're working like this, you scowl at them. Of course, you don't realize it, but *they* do. I miss my old chum, dearest. I miss your playing with me. . . . .

"I want to talk to you, because I've been thinking that maybe we aren't fair to you in this house, and perhaps I am least of all. You don't get the quiet and the relaxation you should, and I've decided on a change.

"I've decided on it for two reasons, because one's for your comfort, and the other's for . . . . well, it's just to safeguard us from doing anything so crazy as we came near doing last Saturday night. Dearest, how right and wise and *good* you were! I've been thinking about it ever since, and I went over to church this afternoon and offered up a prayer of thanksgiving. I reckon I just lost my head, Bart, but you—you were simply marvelous. Oh, my dear, I'm so grateful, because I might be out of my senses with worry right this minute if you hadn't had your wits about you!

"Of course, it may happen again. I realize that you and I have a problem, and I understand that as well as you do. Oh, I've been praying about it . . . .

"Now, this is the safeguard I've thought of: I'm going to put the baby in with Janey—he's quite old enough now for him to sleep in there, and it will be a fine, developing thing for her to look after him at night—and I'm taking Margaret in with me, and I've moved your bed into the nursery——"

"You've moved what?"

"Now, *listen,* Bart, don't go off half-cocked until you've heard me out, because it's the only safe thing for us to do. We *mustn't* have another baby. You and I have agreed about that, because it would be a calamity just now. We mustn't think of another for several years, because I doubt if my health would stand it; perhaps it would, perhaps it wouldn't; that's neither here nor there. The point is, we simply cannot *afford* to have another child. Our Heavenly Father alone knows how we're ever going to take care of the five we have.

"Now, listen! Don't go scowling at me!

"We must do something to prevent our doing what *might* have happened night before last. Oh, I know I was just as bad about it as you! I'll take all the blame, if you think I should. I'll admit sometimes I—I—well, I lose control of myself, and I've just *got* to have a check—a check on me as well as on you, and so I thought of this plan of taking Margaret in with me. I have her bed right next to mine, and I've moved you—everything—into Dickey's room. Oh, my dear, you have no idea how comfortable you're going to be in there, or how cozy and nice it is.

"Bart, I can see you're not a bit happy about this arrangement, but *help* me, darling, because I need your help. Try this plan for a few weeks and see how you like it. . . . . Oh, I know what you're thinking, but I'm nearly beside myself, because I don't know what else to do!

"Dearest, don't be mad at me! You love me, and you *know* I love you, and I'm doing this as much for your sake as mine. You helped me keep my bearings last Saturday night, and I want to help us both keep our bearings from now on, because when I think what might have happened . . . .! You'll thank me some day. You'll call down Heaven's blessing upon me."

She was on her knees before him, her hands clasping his forearms, her wide dark eyes rich with tears.

"Help me, dearest," she urged. "Don't be mad at me. Try it just for a few weeks, because, if you don't like it, I'll move everything back; I promise you.

"Oh, dearest, dearest, I don't want another baby. I mustn't have another baby. . . . . Help me, won't you?"

CHAPTER V

§ 1

On friday, February 6, 1920, a blizzard struck New York City. The snow was falling when Bart went in on the train that morning, and it fell in fierce, slanting, wind-driven lines all day. People stood in the windows of their offices and looked out at the blundering motor cars, the laboring truck horses, and the rubber-covered policemen at the crossings, white with snow. By noon, the street cars were withdrawn, their tracks obliterated. A snow plow was stalled on the east side of Union Square.

Bart, observing the swirling flakes, thought only of his children and of the fun the heavy fall would mean to them, but when he left the Gotham House a little before his time to take his usual train, he realized that the storm was of unprecedented violence. He fought his way along the streets, ankle-deep, often knee-deep in the drifts, head and shoulders bent to the furious on-rush, seeing his way with difficulty. The subway trains were jammed, the station platforms wet with tracks from dripping garments. He found himself presently one of several hundred homeward-bound passengers congregated before the closed iron gates of the Long Island trains in the depot, staring perplexedly at a sign fixed to the grilling which read: "Train service to Long Island has been temporarily discontinued on account of the storm."

With a half-formed intention of telephoning Peggy and explaining his predicament, he crossed the street, via the subway, passing through the tunnel beneath the tracks, and came up into the Pennsylvania Hotel on the east side of the street. It then occurred to him it would be an excellent idea to spend the night at the hotel so as not to lose his evening's work. But he found that the telephone lines to Port Washington were down, and further, that there was not a room to be had in the hotel. He was referred to the Martinique, a block away, and braving the snow once more, he forged his way thither and was fortunate in obtaining the last available accommodation.

The Martinique was crowded with stormbound travelers like himself. The long, spacious foyer which stretched through the building from one street to another was filled with people, sitting or standing, trying to while away the time, smoking, reading newspapers, talking or idly staring at the slowly milling throng.

Having secured his room, Bart again plunged out into the storm, found a modest restaurant close by, had something to eat, and shortly was back and upstairs in his cheerless quarters with his manuscript open before him. He tried once more to telephone Peggy, and left word to be called as soon as the line was clear.

"Oh, she's bound to understand what's keeping me," he assured himself, dismissing the worry and turning his attention to his work.

But he had hardly settled to it, before a thought obtruded. He played with it a moment and put it from him. It returned. He shook himself free of it. It came back. He kept seeing Mildred Bransom's face smiling at him.

"Oh, it isn't probable," he said, aloud; "it isn't a bit likely."

He tapped his teeth with the end of his pen.

"There isn't a chance in a thousand," he argued, addressing the somber wall paper.

Still, where would she be on such a night?

"Perhaps she'll be having a friend or two in for dinner."

Yet that was hardly likely. She had said she was much alone.

He recalled his thoughts on the train after the last time he had seen her.

"Yes," he said; "of course . . . . I oughtn't to."

A picture rose before him of the room with the tall green curtains, the cheerful fire, the two chairs pulled up before it, Mildred talking—talking—talking on such a night, with the snow smothering the world in white . . . .

He mustn't let himself think of such visions!

His eyes traveled to the wall telephone. He could at least speak to her, tell her he was down at the Martinique, working . . . .

No, it would be the height of folly!

Still . . . .

He pulled himself to his feet, and, under "B," ran his eye down the columns of names in the telephone directory.

Probably he wouldn't be able to get her. If the Long Island lines were down . . . .

Suddenly and without trouble he was talking to her.

§ 2

After he had hung up the receiver, his hand clung to it. He leaned his head against the door jamb, his eyes closed a moment. Then he went back to the table where lay his work and sat down heavily in his chair.

He had told her about the train service, that he was in the city for the night—at the Martinique—and then, like a crazy fool, had said he had been thinking of braving the storm and coming out to see her.

And then . . . .

Ah, then, when that happy catch in her voice betrayed her pleasure at the prospect, he—still like a crazy fool!—had told her he thought he had better not come. And then—God! that change in her tone! He had tried to ignore it, talked lightly, had told her he was hard at work on his book, and she had said . . . . had said . . . . What did it matter what she had said!

She had always been so decent to him, so kind, so—so sympathetic, so wonderfully understanding! She was alone, probably lonesome, perhaps apprehensive. It would cheer her up a lot if he went. They'd be sure to have a great evening together talking . . . .

He would go!

He wouldn't go! . . . . It wasn't safe. He *knew* it wasn't.

He turned back to his manuscript, scowling at the page, rereading what he had written, trying to concentrate.

Five minutes later he was staring at the ugly arabesques in the somber wall paper. Again he saw the room with the drawn green curtains, the fire lit, the soft lamps burning, and he could hear the swish-swish of the snow against the windows . . . .

"Hell!" he said through locked teeth.

He flung down his pen and went to the telephone on the wall.

"I'm coming," he told her brusquely. "It will take me a little while to get there. I'll take the El' to Fifty-ninth and scramble across town as best I can. There isn't a thing moving."

With eager fingers and a fierce joy of excitement, he buttoned himself to the neck into his overcoat, pulled down his hat over his eyes, caught up his gloves, and went out, banging and locking his room door behind him.

§ 3

It was just as he had pictured it when, spent and short of breath from fighting the wind and the stinging scud, he found himself standing in the doorway of her apartment. The green curtains were drawn, shutting out the storm and the night, the fire was burning, the easy chairs were drawn up before it, Mildred herself, gay, laughing, was delighted to welcome him, giving him the impression that she too shared his feeling that this particular visit was an adventure. She carried his hat and overcoat to some inner room where they could drip and dry out. He thought she looked particularly lovely. She wore a negligee, the front of silver and the train of some sort of velvet brocade, wine colored. There was a fall of silver lace at the elbows, but her arms and the round, white, slim column of throat on which her head moved so easily, were bare.

"I have some sherry," she told him, returning; "I knew you'd be wanting something warm when you came in, and I was almost in despair when I found that every drop of whisky I had was gone. Then I bethought me of this sherry; you'll find it excellent. Tell me, is it terrible out? I don't remember in my life seeing such a storm. The janitor brought me in an evening paper, and they speak of a possible food shortage. Think it's likely?"

They seated themselves before the fire, and Bart gratefully drank his sherry, promptly refilling his glass from the decanter on the tile tabouret at his elbow, and the talk he so loved began, Mildred speaking, incisively, wittily, of literature and art, of people and human nature. She stimulated him in turn to expression. He was often surprised and gratified, to hear himself turn a neat phrase, and to be able to capture in words some elusive thought on the brink of escape. It was Mildred's influence. He had never talked that way with anybody else.

"An astonishingly brilliant woman," he thought, eyeing her lovely mop of fair hair with its reddish tinge and its graceful sweep about her head.

They talked of writers and of books and of magazines; they talked of President Wilson and Mr. Lansing's dismissal; they talked of marriage and sex and morals. The storm raged, and the snow beat against the windows and piled itself in great white mounds along the sills. But Bart and Mildred did not look out upon it. The room was warm and softly lighted, the fire companionable and reassuring; they were hardly conscious of the rioting tempest.

But toward midnight, they did part the folds of the green curtains to gaze upon the flight of torn and tattered ghosts that hurtled past, whipped to their headlong race by the merciless gale. The street lamps revealed a trackless emptiness. The cornices, copings, and ledges of the opposite houses were banked with hoary burdens. Not a vehicle or a pedestrian was in sight.

They stood side by side, each with a fold of curtain in hand, looking out upon the windswept scene, and the billows of snow plunging, rollicking, leaping, somersaulting past.

Bart thought: "God, I hate to go out in this. It will be a job getting back to the Martinique."

Mildred, reading his mind, said: "It's madness for you to attempt it. Better stay here; I can make you entirely comfortable on that couch."

A silence followed, and each grew conscious of it. Thoughts catapulted through Bart's brain. The current between them was flowing—electric waves—growing stronger and stronger. He could feel his throat drying, his pulse quickening. The headiness he had experienced once before seized him. The street lamps, slashed by the driving lines of snow, blurred and starred, shooting out a million dazzling rays. His heart pounded in his breast, his hand tightened on the curtain folds.

Then, as if responding to muscles not his own, his left hand, hanging at his side, moved ever so slightly, turned the fraction of a degree, and found hers. Instantly their fingers intertwined, and with the contact, the current between them, flashed to flame. He moved toward her like a drunken man. They caught each other in their arms.

"Mildred—Mildred," he breathed, his lips in her hair.

"Bart!"

They stood apart, searching one another's eyes. Slowly their mouths drew nearer; their lips met.

Madness!

"You must not think; you must not think," a voice within his whirling brain warned him.

Now—now—here was the woman. . . . . God, she was glorious! . . . . He caught her to him again, kissing her cheek, her temples, her hair, her neck. Her round bare arms were about his head; she dragged it down to her, clinging fiercely.

"I've always loved you," she cried with a sob of passion. "Oh, Bart, Bart—be good to me!"

§ 4

Next morning, he once more stood between the curtains in the front room and gazed out upon a world buried in white, silent beneath a leaden sky. The snow had ceased to fall; the wind had died. Here and there little pigmies of men were already commencing the gigantic task of removing the vast blanket Nature had laid upon the city. A snow plow with large revolving brushes was sputtering ineffectually at the Fifty-ninth Street crossing. Now and then, the sharp scrape of iron on cement sounded a muffled note through the silent, cold air.

Remorse—stark, terrible, ugly—knocked at his heart. Nearer, nearer, imminent now, was the moment when he must reckon with his conscience, meet his own soul face to face.

The room he loved so well was bleak and cold, despite the fire burning in the grate. He felt physically dirty. He rubbed his fingers on either side his chin, conscious of the overnight stubble.

Mildred came in, hatted and costumed for the office. He looked at her, surprised he felt no revulsion; he was not even aware of embarrassment. She appeared just as she always did, fresh, confident, cheerful, smartly groomed and habited. He liked her. She was in love with him. No doubt of that. He liked her because she was in love with him. The intimacies of the night had left no room for doubt of how she felt. Poor Mildred! He was sorry for her. She wasn't to blame . . . . not her fault . . . .

She came to stand beside him, slipping an arm through his, her head, in its snug-fitting modish hat, against his shoulder. They stood so for a while, looking down at the white-robed street beneath the gray, leaden sky.

Presently there came from her a little quivering sigh.

"I suppose, now that I've found you, I shall lose you," she said gravely.

He made no comment. She went on:

"Well, I've had one night with you. No one can ever take that memory away . . . .

"Bart," she said sharply, her manner changing, "don't think badly of me. I've dreamed about you for many, many years and hoped some day you'd come to like me. I think, if things had been different, you and I might have been very happy together. I admire you, I think you're a magnificent person, a very modest, great-hearted soul. I truly believe some day you'll make a first-rate writer. You have only to persevere. My heart aches for you, Bart, when I think of how burdened and handicapped you are, and if I can help you to get on your feet, to become established so that you can quit that damned shoemaker's magazine and live like a Christian gentleman, I shall have all the reward I want."

He pressed her arm and squeezed the limp cold fingers linked with his own.

"Now, I know you are going to go through all kinds of mental agony over what's happened. I think you're foolish. No one knows, or will *ever* know. I understand just how much of yourself you gave me. I suppose you will consider what we've done as 'sin'! It's sin only if you *think* it's sin. Personally, I don't regard it as such. I've loved two or three men in my life, and I don't hold these things as sacred as you do. I believe I'm right about it, and people will come to my way of thinking sooner or later, and then we'll have a lot more happiness in the world. In the meantime, I suppose I can't prevent you from lacerating your soul with self-reproaches. That's your nature, and possibly if you weren't so damned Puritanical and strait-laced, built just that way, I shouldn't care for you as I do. Well, live your hell if you want to, only bear in mind that personally I can't see that any harm has been done to anybody so long as they don't know about it. And no one will ever know about it from me. Blot it from your mind, if it's going to distress you. You will see, I'll never embarrass you by an allusion. I shall content myself as best I may in living over and over each moment of it. . . . ."

Stirred by her words, he impulsively put his arm about her and warmly kissed her. She closed her eyes, a frown between them, her own arm about his neck, whispering:

"Again, Bart dear . . . . again . . . . again . . . ."

§ 5

Peggy was at her mending when he reached home that afternoon. She was in a low rocker in the embrasure of the sitting room windows, and, as he plunged along through the snowdrifts, making for the brick steps, she rapped on the glass with her thimble to attract his attention and wave at him.

Taking off his rubber overshoes in the glassed-in porch, he knocked out the soft snow from the cuffs of his trousers, removed his overcoat, shook that, gave his hat a flick, and with his garments over his arm, passed into the house.

Again it was Saturday afternoon. He had remained at the office until nearly one, had stopped at the lunch counter in the Pennsylvania Station for a sandwich and a glass of milk, and had caught a train for home in the neighborhood of two o'clock.

"Hello," she called to him; "they let you come home at last, did they? Wasn't that a funny experience? I've been trying to remember when you and I have been separated overnight. As I told you this morning when you phoned, I wasn't worried. Wasn't it nice of Commodore Westover? He got in on the last train that came through, and then so thoughtfully telephoned to say he didn't think you'd make it. Where did you stay?"

He told her the Martinique, kissed her warm cheek, and sat down.

"I thought you'd phone, of course, and then Kate said she 'spected the lines were down, so I called up the operator, and she said they were. Did you feel awfully lonesome?"

"Of course," he said. He looked at her critically as she bent over the darning ball, her needle swiftly weaving in and out across the strands of black yarn. He wondered what she would do if she knew . . . .

She babbled away about the children and the house. The boys, it seemed, were out tobogganning in the Hacket Estates, and Mrs. Westover had called for the girls and taken them sleighing in one of Thornwall's old sleighs.

"I declare, it sounded so sweet and lovely to hear the sleigh bells this morning," said Peggy.

"How is it in the city?" she asked.

He told her, conscious he was listless.

"What's the matter, Bart?" She gave him a look. "You sound so 'down'!"

"Tired, I guess."

"Well, Heavenly day, my dear, I hope you're not too tired to shovel the walks, because I've been counting on you doing it this afternoon."

He looked at her, saying nothing.

"Clear the walks?" he thought. "That will take the rest of the afternoon and the better part of to-morrow!"

He had hoped to write.

"I see," he said aloud.

"Well, there isn't another soul to do it," she explained. "All the available men are clearing the streets in town. You ought to see it down there! Why, you just can't get through!"

Suddenly he was seized with an impulse to fall on his knees, bury his face in her lap, and pour out his unhappiness, telling her everything, imploring her forgiveness.

Ah, he loved her! He *loved* her! He wanted to be right with her and with himself! Peggy was fair; she would understand! He could not be reconciled to himself until she knew and had forgiven him. He knew he had done wrong! He had been false to her and false to the children. He thought of his boys' confident, hero-worshiping eyes. His throat contracted, and with a swift motion, he covered his eyes.

"Bart, you *are* tired!" his wife exclaimed, regarding him with solicitude.

"No-no," he reassured her. "I'm quite all right. I'll get at the walks."

Rising abruptly, he left the room, and in a few moments, sweatered and booted, he was fiercely attacking the snowy banks about the house.

§ 6

Towards six o'clock, the boys came stamping home from their tobagganing, their cheeks glowing apple red, their Mackinaw coats powdered and encrusted with snow. A few minutes later, the jingling sleigh stopped before the house, and Jane and Margaret came trooping in, scattering clothing, adding their piping cries to their brothers' shouts. Dickey, who had wakened up cross and fretting from his nap, wailed bitterly with their advent.

There was pot roast with mashed potatoes for dinner, and a rice pudding, slightly burned.

After the meal was over and the table cleared, Peggy, wistfully, fearing to be refused, asked Bart if he would go with her to the Westovers' for the evening. They had their sister-in-law from Dayton staying with them, she explained, and when the Commodore telephoned the day before, he had said that if they had nothing better to do Saturday night, they might go over for a session of Five Hundred. Kate, Peggy offered as a clinching argument, had agreed to stay in. His sense of wrongdoing weighing heavily upon him, Bart readily consented. She was delighted. She fluttered like a bird over the prospect of the visit, indulging in endless chatter about which dress to wear, interrupting herself with remarks to the girls and sharp admonitions to the boys, whom she had agreed to allow to go to the movies.

There were no cards, however, at the Westovers' that evening. Cap Watson and his wife came in, laughing over their tussle with the snow by way of back yards. The men sat in the dining room, smoking cigars, while the Commodore and Cap extolled the merits of the "Stars," urging Bart to place an order for one; they'd all have some great fun racing next summer, they assured him. The women bent their heads together in the adjoining sitting room and told the visiting sister-in-law about recent scandalous affairs in the Village Welfare Society. At eleven, Mrs. Westover brought in Grape Juice Punch and some hard-boiled egg sandwiches.

Bart took Peggy home shortly afterwards. She was in gay spirits and acted like a frivolous schoolgirl. He thought her very pretty in her flouncy skirt and dangling gold earrings. Putting his arms about her, he hugged her close before she went upstairs, trying to ease his pain, kissing the soft curve of her neck, her cheek, her forehead.

For half an hour after she had gone, he sat before his desk, staring at the light, his hands folded on the desk edge in front of him, thinking. Then, with a great sigh, he heaved himself to his feet and went down to the basement to stoke the furnace.

§ 7

The snow, a warrantable excuse, kept them from church the next morning, and everybody slept late. Breakfast over, Bart and the boys floundered through the drifts to the station, secured a copy of the Sunday newspaper, and floundered home again. There followed the usual hour of children rapt in solemn study of the "funny" sheet, while Bart looked at the headlines, read the theatrical news, the reviews, and advertisements on the book page. Towards eleven, he donned his sweater and boots and, assisted ineffectually by his sons, attacked once more the deep snow along the sidewalk before the house. He was at it again in the afternoon, and long before the job was finished his back was aching and his hands were sore and blistered. He slept then until roused for the inevitable baked beans and hot chocolate supper at six-thirty. That night he worked a little on his story, but felt low-spirited, uninspired, and tore up the three pages he had written without reading them.

Monday, he was at his office, with Mr. Vonderlies and Madame Blum handing him photographs of shoes for the engraver, and Mr. Solomon yelling at him to know why the half-tone cut of a stitching-room nippers which the American Shoe Machinery Corporation had sent in to accompany their ad, had been left out of their page, and Hans Freünd swearing at him insultingly in unintelligible German. At noon, he went out with Mr. Vonderlies to lunch on imported frankfurters, sauerkraut, and a stein of near-beer at a neighboring Third Avenue restaurant, afterwards accompanying the old man to a pawnbroker's shop to watch him select from a tray, and for ten cents, a pair of nose glasses whose lenses best suited his aging eyesight. The afternoon was a repetition of the morning, except that Miss Schwartz left a note on his desk to say she had a "splitting" headache and had gone home, bequeathing him in consequence the task of locating sixty cuts which Mr. Bliss wanted "proved up" immediately, so that he might paste their proofs into a dummy and take it on the late afternoon train for Boston, where he hoped to book an advertiser for a full page.

The five-twenty home that night. There were still no taxis moving, and Bart had to walk from the station. He found John, who had been hit on the ear with a hard snowball, in bed with a poultice bound to his head. Dan was in disgrace for having been "saucy" to Kate, while the small girls, aided by their mother, were intent upon making valentines in Bart's study. Scissors, paste, brushes, and colored-paper clippings littered the floor. Dinner was late because the butcher boy had left the wrong order. Peggy was worried. Dickey, she was satisfied, had definitely an "upset." Bart had no more than started his work that evening, when she sent him down through the snow to the drug store for castor oil.

Tuesday varied only in detail from this dull round; Wednesday was the same; Thursday, no different. The awful sameness and emptiness oppressed him as never before. Several times, when he was alone, he found himself involuntarily covering his face with his hands to prevent his screaming out a protest against the utter drabness of his existence.

Shut away in his mind, as if by a door, was Mildred, the room he loved, and her rare companionship—yes, and her body too, so slim, so perfect, so beautifully made. He would not let himself think of her, but she was there—in the little chamber of his mind. He had only to open the door . . . .

He wrestled with himself, concentrating his thoughts on Peggy, reminding himself of her goodness, her cheerfulness, her loyalty, her love, her sweet beauty. He conjured up old memories of their early days together in New York, their happy, first weeks in the three-room apartment equipped with King Ludwig's furniture, hot summer nights lying in bed with only a sheet for cover, meetings in Central Park, the long, trying, worried months before Danny was born, the night of awful travail at the hospital, and then the hard years that had followed in the Bronx. He exerted himself to please her, humored her whims, did odd jobs for her about the house, brought her little presents from the city.

"Oh, my God!" he burst out once to her, "let's get out of here, Peggy. Let's go 'way together. Let's go out to the ranch in California and get away from all this cold and snow and ugliness."

"Why, what's the matter with you, Bart? I think you must be sick or something."

"Guess I am; guess I'm sick; I don't know what's the matter with me. I only know I just want you and the children—and I want to go away from here."

"My goodness, Bart, I don't know what you're *thinking* about!"

"I don't know either. I know I hate New York, I hate *The Shoe Ægis,* I hate Port Washington—these people—this house—everything! Let's pull up stakes and clear out. Come on, Peggy, will you?"

"You must be crazy! I never heard such foolishness! Why, we have our own lovely home here, our children go to school, they have their friends, we have ours, you're a very prominent member of the Yacht Club, and I may be president of the Village Welfare Society some day. This is our home, where we belong; we've grown up here and occupy a place in the community. You're just working and worrying yourself to death over that silly old novel of yours. I wish to goodness you'd give it up!"

He was silenced.

Another evening, he said:

"Peg dear, couldn't you and I go on a little trip this coming week-end? We haven't been away together since I don't know when. Leave the children with Kate; they'll be all right. Let's go down to Atlantic City next Saturday; we can take the three o'clock train, spend the night there at one of the big hotels, and walk up and down on the Boardwalk on Sunday . . . ."

She looked at him with a frankly puzzled expression.

"I don't know what's the matter with you these days, Bart! I couldn't leave the baby now with his upset tummy, and I *wouldn't* for the world. Besides, Leelee has the Five Hundred Club next Saturday night, and we don't want to miss that!"

He gazed at her, battling down a sobbing heave, stilling with an effort the smarting of his eyes.

"Do you love me, Peg?" he demanded.

"Of course I do, silly, only you've got to be sensible. Why, Heavenly day, I can't run off to Atlantic City with you just like that! I couldn't leave the children, and I haven't any clothes, and besides, it would cost a lot of money, and you *know* it, and I don't think we have the right to spend so much for just our own pleasure, particularly when Dan and Jack both need shoes again—I declare, I don't know *how* they wear them out!—and I certainly wouldn't feel like wasting so much on a gay jaunt to Atlantic City when they were going round with holes in their soles."

He wanted to scream again, twist his fingers in his hair and tear it.

§ 8

Friday morning, a boy opened the door of his office.

"Mr. Carter?" At Bart's nod, he handed him an envelope and went out.

> "Bart Darling [read the note]: Can't you arrange to come up to lunch to-morrow at one? I want so much to see you. M."

He stared, reading it over several times. Then there came from him a long weary breath.

"Oh . . . ."

Something broke within him.

§ 9

That evening he said casually to Peggy over his plate of soup:

"I may have to stay in to-morrow afternoon. We're getting out the Spring Fashion number, and I suppose there'll be plenty of last-minute things to do. Better not count on me earlier than the five-twenty."

"Some things," he said to himself later as he stared down at his manuscript, "are just too much for me! They're stronger than I am."

Then he flung himself into his work, the words pouring from him in a rush, and he knew he was writing well.

CHAPTER VI

§ 1

SPRING broke in a glory of green and warm, heartening sunshine. The Avenue bloomed with window boxes; the public squares were brave with red and yellow tulips; the country was sweet and full of earthy smells; dogwood checkered the leafing trees between Great Neck and Port Washington.

"Dearest," Peggy said to Bart, "a week from to-morrow is our anniversary, and I thought I'd ask the Westovers, the Fultons, and the P. M. G. Millers for dinner, and Marjorie Miller can teach us a lot about bridge. You see, we'd have two tables, and she'll circulate between them. I'll give the children an early supper, and get in Kate's sister, Jule, to help; we'll have a cake and candles, and I thought I'd ask Leelee to let me have some of that dandelion wine she makes."

"That's fine," he said indifferently. His mind was upon a performance of *Carmen* at the Metropolitan to which Mildred had taken him the previous Saturday afternoon. A friend had sent her a couple of seats. He was thinking of the end of the second act where José has decided to throw in his lot with Carmen and the smugglers.

"La liberté," the chorus and principles had sung; *"la liberté . . . . la liberté . . . ."*

Mildred had squeezed his hand as it lay hidden beneath a fold of her dress, and he had squeezed hers in return.

"La liberté . . . ."

§ 2

"Peggy dear," he said to her in May, "I'm going to take my two weeks' vacation the latter half of this month, and I'm going away alone somewhere, I think to a little town called

New Canaan in Connecticut where there's a nice quiet inn. I'll finish this book of mine there. The chances look good for my selling it to *Crosby's,* and Mildred Bransom says if they're to run it, the manuscript has to be in by the first of June. The story's finished, but I have a lot of typing and revising to do, and it will take me every bit of two weeks. I'll never get it done if I stay home; there are too many distractions and interruptions."

Peggy made no immediate answer. She sat not far from his desk in the study, shelling peas from a large brown paper bag. To-morrow was Kate's day off.

"How often do you see Mildred Bransom?" she asked, intent on filling her lap with a large handful of pods.

He tried to speak naturally, but his tone lacked smoothness.

"Oh—she telephones now and then."

"*She* telephones?"

"Well . . . . maybe I do; I don't remember."

"Do you see her?"

"Occasionally."

"Where?"

"Well, ah—where do you suppose?"

"Do you go to her apartment?"

"Of course not. I go to her office."

Silence.

"Well, it seems to me you might work just as well here——"

"Out of the question!"

"—and I think it's just horrid of you to spend your vacation away from us when we had so much fun last year. The children are counting on it, and everything."

"I know, Peg, but this may mean money, a great deal of it. I can't afford to miss the opportunity. Mildred likes my story; says she feels sure Crosby'll take it."

An interval.

"She's read it, has she?"

"Part of it."

"When did she read it?"

"Oh, I don't know; 'way last January or February, sometime. I met her on the train, and she said she'd like to see some of my work. I told you about it."

Peggy bent her head over her shelling.

"I don't think Mildred Bransom knows a thing she's talking about."

"Oh, come, Peg; she's managing editor for *Crosby's*. He wouldn't be paying her twelve thousand a year if she was a numskull."

"She's not getting any twelve thousand a year!"

"Oh, yes, she is."

"I don't believe it."

"Well, that doesn't prove it isn't so."

Peggy let her hands fall into her lap, and faced him.

"She's just *stringing* you, Bart."

He flushed, his jaws clicking. He shrugged.

"Can't you see she's just *fooling* you? She's just feeding you on hopes Mr. Crosby may take your story, and you know perfectly well he'll do nothing of the kind. Oh, it's as plain as paint to me! It's because of *her* you've been wasting all your time scribbling away at that old thing. This whole winter and spring you've been working away in here, denying yourself to me and the children, always saying whenever there was a chance to help me or play with them—give them a little bit of your attention or companionship—that you couldn't, you had to *work!* Now I see it's all been just to please that woman! Why, she's fooling you, Bart, pulling the wool over your eyes. I suppose you go up to her rooms and read her what you've written, and she tells you how *wonderful* you are!"

He refused to commit himself, and Peggy rushed on.

"I don't see how you can be so—so despicable! You *know* Mildred Bransom is in love with you, and you go to see her—I don't know when or how—and then you come home to me and the children! . . . . I suppose you kiss and fondle her——"

He stopped her with an oath, rising to his feet, striking the desk with the flat of his hand.

"That's a damned lie," he shouted. He wheeled, caught up his hat, and strode out into the spring night, banging the front door behind him.

§ 3

He did go to New Canaan in mid-May, and Mildred on two occasions went up to Stamford, where he met her and motored with her by taxi to Greenwich, where a couple, friends of Mildred's, had a house. The couple were away in Europe, but had told Mildred to make use of their home whenever she chose. It was a cunning little house with an imitation thatched roof of rolling shingles and was set in a lovely garden bounded by a high stone wall. Its gate stood in a round arch of masonry, and a rambler rose vine, thick with leaves, almost hid the stones from sight. There were no servants; only a gardener caretaker.

The setting was idyllic, the situation romantic. The walled-in garden was gay with spring flowers—daffodils, pansies, verbena, and syringa; there were neatly clipped box hedges along the narrow graveled walks, and a fountain of colored tile in the center, with a bronze figure of a child holding up a turtle. The place was meticulously cared for by old Rafaele, who smiled and smirked at the visitors, showing his gold teeth broadly in welcome. He called them *Signor* and *Signora* and was happy to do what he could to make them comfortable.

It was fun to enter the empty house, which had not been occupied since the previous summer, investigate the kitchen, the bedrooms upstairs, the arrangement below, remove some of the dusty covers that protected the furniture, hunt for the linen closet, make up dismantled beds, and start preparations for dinner. There was electricity but no gas, and Mildred, nothing daunted, proceeded to cook their evening meal with an electric percolator, an electric toaster, while upon an inverted pressing iron she most successfully scrambled eggs. The repast, Bart pronounced a triumph, and with cheese and a bottle of Chianti and other delectable edibles Mildred had brought up with her from the city, they fared sumptuously. At night there was a moon; the garden was sweet and heady with scented flowers, and the tiny patter of water in the low tiled fountain sounded like the tinkle of a guitar.

But despite the charm and romantic adventure, despite the laughter and love-making, Bart was not happy. He could not abandon himself as Mildred did, joyously and completely, to their hours together.

Back again in New Canaan, he thought long and seriously over the situation, but could come to no decision. Peggy and the children were the foundation of his existence, the background of his life; yet, loving them deeply and devotedly as he did, he could not entertain the thought of relinquishing Mildred. He had not the strength to do it. His days would be utterly desolate without her. Never to lunch, talk, or be with her again was too awful even to contemplate, yet he knew he was chancing the wreckage of all he prized and loved most.

"Oh, my God," he groaned in desperation more than once, "whatever is to become of me!"

§ 4

When he returned home, he realized there was an estrangement between himself and Peggy. Not that she was cold or unpleasant; he frequently thought her unusually kind and considerate, less critical than ordinarily. Nevertheless, there was a difference; he could not put his finger upon it. She evaded him, if nothing more. He was conscious, too, that his manner toward her was not the same as it had been; he was restrained, less irritable, less communicative. Any demonstration of affection on his part made him feel hypocritical. He could not put his arms about her, hug and embrace her without self-consciousness. Sometimes, when he forced himself to be affectionate, he suspected she was not fooled. He came to kiss her less and less. He did not call her "muggins" any more.

§ 5

One night, some weeks after New Canaan, he went to her in the sitting room, where she sat at her small desk writing to Jane, and laid before her a buff, oblong piece of paper. It was a check drawn to his order for ten thousand dollars and bore the signature of "Jonathan A. Crosby."

She picked it up, examined it, then raised her wide brown questioning eyes to his face.

"They took it," he said, smiling.

"Your story?"

"*The Hacienda.* That's for the serial rights."

She fingered the check a moment more, then gently placed it on the desk's edge before him. He could see her biting her lip and that she was troubled. He felt sorry for her.

"That will take care of both mortgages," he said. "I telephoned Gill's attorney, and he said we could take up the four thousand whenever we wished. I told him to draw up the papers and I'd be in next week with a certified check. The first mortgage comes due the first of next month, and I told Chip Rhodes we would not renew. That increases our income by six hundred a year, and beginning next month I'll deposit an extra fifty dollars to your account."

Still she could find no words to say to him. He sensed she felt keenly her defeat, and stooping down he kissed her hair, then went back to his study and to the short story he was attempting.

An hour later, she came to stand in the doorway.

"I don't think I said how pleased I am for you, Bart. I know what this must mean to you. I'm very happy—very happy about it, indeed. I—I'm proud," she finished lamely.

He knew she was thinking of Mildred. It had been Mildred, of course, who had persuaded Mr. Crosby to accept *The Hacienda.* Bart looked at her with an indulgent smile.

"My dear," he said, "I'm sure you're glad about it. And the money will come in handy, won't it?"

"Yes, indeed," she said.

§ 6

As the summer progressed, he grew accustomed to his relationship with either woman. He spent what time he could in Mildred's company, and the more frequently he saw her, the less his conscience troubled him. When uncomfortable thoughts arose, he shook them from him. The triangle would work itself out some way or other, he assured himself. It would end naturally, and then he would not have to be hypocritical with Peggy any more.

Mildred went to Mansfield in July and took her mother up to Lake Geneva in Wisconsin for the worst of the hot weather.

Her letters to him were delightfully amusing. She illustrated them with ridiculous little pictures which made him laugh. Now and then she waxed loving, but her words of affection made him squirm, though at the same time they made him long for her.

He toiled at his writing while she was away, sometimes conscious of relief at her absence, sometimes feeling desperately the need of her sympathy and encouragement.

He and Peggy and the children had some happy times that summer. The battered Dodge was equipped with new tires, and frequently, on Sundays, his wife would pack a picnic basket, and they went on exploring expeditions to an ocean beach or down the Sound side of the Island. The water, in an odd way, brought Mildred to Bart's mind, and after luncheon, when the thermos bottles had been put back into their case, and the trash of boxes, paper, and other refuse had been burned, he would sit a little apart from the rest and dream of her.

He was unprepared, and a little discomfited when unexpectedly she came back to the city a week sooner than planned, and when her laughing, breathless voice sounded over the telephone, he was aware of a definite feeling of distaste, but it was for that moment only. In less than half an hour, she was in his arms and he was devouring her with his lips.

Life seemed to settle down then to a fairly normal round. He was with Mildred whenever possible, usually on Saturday afternoons, sometimes for a stolen hour or two before train time, sometimes at the Waldorf for luncheon. Once, when he had to put in an evening's work at the office, he telephoned Peggy he would stay in town, joined Mildred at eleven, and spent the night with her.

There seemed to be a kind of a truce between himself and his wife. He noticed she rarely reproached him these days for his usual delinquencies. Her manner troubled him, and now and then he longed for one of her old scoldings. The children's racket disturbed him occasionally. He sometimes shouted at the boys to stop their infernal uproar, but more often he enjoyed their rough ways and chatter, especially Dan's, who had a habit of coming to stand before him, hands thrust into his trouser pockets, feet wide apart, to ask questions about matters which perplexed him, with a frown between his eyes and lips puckered together in judicial fashion. The five-year-old Margaret, too, had a special appeal for her father. She would climb into his lap, give him a fairy-like kiss, and look about her with a shrewd perception which delighted him. A wise child, he considered her.

The petty demands of the household and the irritating duties which a few months ago had spelled annoyance for him did not now trouble him so much. He no longer worried over Kate's tantrums, nor minded having to straighten the furniture or pick up after the children's games. He did not fret at having to stoke the furnace the last thing at night, or shake it down and open the dampers the first thing in the morning. There was more peace in the house and his nerves seemed less on edge than at any time in the previous two years.

He came too, to enjoy his shabby, comfortable room at the head of the back stairs, just as Peggy had predicted. He was alone; he need disturb no one. He might read at night if he liked, smoke a cigarette in bed, or enjoy one before he arose. His clothing, books, and papers were always to be found just where he had left them. The children were not allowed to enter this sanctum.

"That's Daddy's room. No one can go in there except Mom. Oh, you'll get socked if you go in there. Mom will get after you like anything!"

Peggy no longer prodded him awake from the adjoining bed with a sleepy request to "please take up the baby." He might sleep Sunday mornings if he liked, he was not expected to attend Mass, he could go up and down the back stairs, to and from his room, without passing through his wife's chamber.

Only one element in his life was still repugnant to his sensibilities, and that was his connection with *The Shoe Ægis*. Even old Mr. Vonderlies, a kindly, gentle soul, began to take on the characteristics of a little withered gnome; Madame Blum disgusted him; Max Solomon he hated, and he took pleasure sometimes in imagining himself sinking his clawed fingers into the man's fat blue jowl. But more than his associates, he despised himself for subjecting his brain and hands to the contemptible business of making and sorting half-tone cuts for a *shoe* magazine! He *knew* he possessed the capacity for better things.

§ 7

In all these feelings, Mildred confirmed and encouraged him. She was constantly urging him to resign from *The Ægis* Her manner toward him became increasingly proprietary. She advised him about everything, about what he should do and what he should say, what he should wear and what he should eat, how he should spend his money. He did not resent it; he recognized her to be a smart, shrewd woman, and he was content to have her direct him. She understood more about life, business, and current literature, he considered, than anybody he had ever known. Only in her attitude toward Peggy and toward what he regarded as peremptory obligations to his wife did he take issue with her. He still felt that whatever time he and Mildred spent together was so much sheer gain; it was conceded from a deeper, stronger, more enduring bond. This nettled Mildred, but she refrained from discussing it. Always she labored to stimulate him to literary effort, advising him, criticizing his work, marketing his products.

That fall and winter, he produced three short stories. Mildred coached and directed him in their composition. Two of them she bought for *Crosby's,* and the third she declared she could sell for a better price than her magazine could afford to pay. Without trouble, she disposed of it to a popular weekly for seven hundred and fifty dollars. At her urging, he began another serial to follow *The Hacienda.* This was to be a story similar in vein and treatment and was to be called *The Alcázar.*

CHAPTER VII

§ I

THE first installment of *The Hacienda* appeared in the March issue of *Crosby's*. The title and Bart's name were conspicuously lettered on the cover, as it was the leading feature of the magazine, and it was excellently illustrated by one of the best known magazine artists. Mildred had not divulged her plans. When she put an advance copy into Bart's hands, he gasped and choked with emotion.

When Peggy's eyes fell upon it, she saw in it only the confirmation of her suspicions: the duplicity of her husband and his immoral entanglement with the woman she had always believed was in love with him. It was an oriflamme advertising their shame.

Bart had not foreseen her reaction. It staggered him. She had known all along that *Crosby's* had accepted his story; it was merely a matter of time before it appeared in its pages. He had handed her the same advance copy which, earlier in the day, Mildred had given him, and did so with a proud and happy smile, confidently expecting Peggy's jubilant congratulation.

She accepted the magazine, gazed only a moment at its gay red and yellow cover on which Bart's name was prominently displayed. Then her nostrils dilated, her face congested, and with a swift, furious motion she tore the gaudy picture from the book, rent the stiff paper in two, and fled upstairs.

Bart was angrier than he had ever been in his life. He stood looking down at the torn scraps and mutilated book, and something welled up within him and burst. His sweating nights of labor, his titanic wrestle with himself to wring this story from his brain, came rushing to mind. It had all been for Peggy and the kids! To pay off the mortgages on the house! Here were his thanks—his reward—his wife's appreciation!

He picked up the paper fragments of the torn magazine with shaking fingers. He stood there, looking at them. His lips trembled, his chin shook. Then he caught up his hat and strode out of the house, cramming scraps and book into his pocket, banging the house door and that of the glassed-in front porch behind him, and hurried with long, determined strides in the direction of the station. There he telephoned Mildred to expect him, and caught the next train for New York.

§ 2

He was calmer by the time he reached her apartment, but he promptly eased his mind to her of all the thoughts he had been thinking, criticizing Peggy as never before, telling her of his wife's ungenerous attitude and jealousy of his work, her lack of imagination, indifference to artistic beauty, and unsympathetic point of view.

Mildred clung to him with strong hands. Her eyes were dark with understanding and with tears.

"My poor boy, my poor, poor boy," she said, and she caught his head and hugged it to her breast.

She had prepared cocktails, as well as something agreeable to eat, by the time he arrived. She urged these upon him, assuring him the food would help him and that she would not talk to him until he had relaxed.

There was Chianti with the meal, vodka afterwards, and Bart plied himself deliberately with the intoxicants. He wanted to keep alive his mood of resentment against Peggy; he was angry, and wished to remain so.

When 'Stasia had cleared the table and he and Mildred were comfortably established in their favorite seats before the fire, she said to him:

"I've been thinking for a long time of having a serious talk with you, Bart, and this last foolish act of Peggy makes right now, it seems to me, the time to say all I have on my mind.

"How long is this to go on? Where is it to end? I'm not thinking of myself, I'm thinking of *you*. You and I have come to care for one another; we have in common that ineffable something which makes for an enduring and perfect companionship. . . . . Do you want to give me up, Bart?"

"No-no—no-no-no!"

"Well, then, what's the answer? You cannot go on trying to fill the lives of two women who expect the same things of you. Now, just let me in cold, unemotional logic describe what each of us has to offer:

"Peggy makes you a home; she's honest, faithful, devoted, loyal; she's kind and considerate, according to her lights. She's the mother of your children; she's borne you five, and that's a very important consideration. She's capable, loving, and she shares with you the memory of ten years' hard, uphill struggle which has gotten you both as far as you've gone, and that also is a big and vital bond. But what else does she give you? I've gathered, from what you've hinted now and then, she denies you your rightful marital privileges. That would give you an excellent reason for demanding a divorce in any fair-minded court of justice. But let that pass. She's no longer a wife to you in that sense and probably will never be again. . . . . More important, to my mind, is that she is incapable of giving you the mental companionship you deserve; she is unable to keep step with your mental growth, she lacks the capacity of stimulating you to self-expression, is out of sympathy with your work, unappreciative of your talents, and has no inclination to help you take your proper place in the world of letters. Bart, Peggy's great sin is that she is *stupid,* and stupidity is the greatest of all crimes. If you stick to her and allow your conduct to be ruled by antiquated, preposterous, narrow, and uncivilized religious principles, you'll remain on the pay roll of a *shoe* magazine the rest of your life, and die a disappointed, worried, bitter old man!

"Now, let me present *my* case. I offer you, in the first place, liberty. You are free to come and go as you like, do as you please. I demand nothing of you; I urge only that you follow my lead and guidance in your quest for literary success. I only ask the privilege of helping you to write, to give your pen a chance and make you rich and famous. I only want the world to acknowledge you, to justify my opinion of your work. To be perfectly honest with you, I want to prove to you I am right and Peggy wrong. More than this, I offer you all I have, my life, my devotion, and myself. It is not as though I had only come to care for you during the past year. I've loved you almost as long as Peggy has. My affection for you is no passing fancy. I remember the exact moment I began to care for you. It was the day I was showing you and Peggy my apartment; Peggy had gone into the kitchen to see about something, and you and I were standing in the front room. Oh, God, how well I remember it! You've never been out of my head or my heart since. I'm not ashamed of loving you. I'm proud of it; I glory in it. . . . . And, Bart, dear, if you walked out of that door this minute and I knew I was never to see you again, I would have this thought to comfort me for the rest of my days and no one could ever take it from me: 'Thank God, I've had him for a little; thank God, I've helped him on his way; thank God, I've earned the right to have him think of me in gratitude and affection, and no matter what happens to him, he will never, never forget me!' "

She was crying now, her two white hands with fingers closed, pressed against her face. He tried to take her in his arms, calling her name in his distress and sympathy, but she pushed him away almost with impatience.

"Oh, I'm not bawling to win your sympathy, to move you to love me by a lot of hysterical tears! I want to be honest with you.

"I tell you, I don't give a *damn* about myself in this business. I can get along without you; I've done it for ten years, and I dare say I can do it for ten more. I've got my job and my work, and I'm tremendously interested in both. If you leave me and go back to Peggy, I shan't commit suicide or mope myself to death. I won't bother you, and you can shift for yourself. I'm not the whining sort of woman who tags after a man. I repeat, I'm not thinking or caring about myself. I'm thinking of *you* and what will happen to you. Bart, you *need* me, you can't get along without me; you will never become a successful author without me by your side. I know my 'stuff'; literature to-day is a business; I'm a business woman. An editor in this day and generation has to understand *business,* and run a magazine along business lines. I don't know anything about literachoor! I know what will put on *circulation.* I don't want to be a writer; I want *you* to be one. Every instinct I have, and all my training, tells me that you can write stories that will sell. You need only guidance. I've been connected with newspapers and magazines for fifteen years. I've learned something in that time. I've learned to recognize a writer, and I *know* you are one. Everywhere I find justification of my opinion. I don't know how many of the girls, and some of the men round the office, have come to me begging me for galley sheets of the rest of your serial. Even Jonathan Crosby, who hasn't any particular love for you, told me the other day what a corking good story he thought *The Hacienda* was. You mark my words, when that book is published, it's going to sell and sell in the neighborhood of half a hundred thousand. And some time or other I've got to talk to you about a publisher. I've an up-and-alive new firm for you that will give you an advance of five thousand and pay you a fifteen per cent royalty or you'll not put pen to contract!

"You're nothing but a child where you, yourself, are concerned, Bart. You are like every other genius who ever lived. You need someone to direct you, protect you, stimulate and understand you. I can do all those things. Peggy can't and never will. The time's coming—it may not be now, this week or this month—when you will have to choose between us, and I want you to be thinking over what you will do.

"I've tried to figure out what my own course should be in this mess. I've asked myself, should I let you alone and allow you to come to your own conclusion, or should I fight for you and for myself, risking your coming sometime to believe me a scheming, designing woman who stole you away from your wife? It's not been easy to decide. Just of late it's come over me that the only person to be considered is you; you are worth a dozen Mildreds and a dozen Peggys, and I'm going to do everything I can to save you from being an employee on a *shoe* magazine for the rest of your life!"

His recent anger at Peggy, the liquor he had drunk, Mildred's eloquence, all contributed to put Bart into an highly emotional mood.

As his companion ended, he sat with his forehead clutched in both hands, elbows on his knees, eyes fixed on the flickering coals in the grate before him. At the moment he was convinced she spoke the truth; there was no other way for him but to give up Peggy and the children. Suddenly he broke into tears.

Mildred waited until he had quieted, then slipped to her knees before him and took his head in her arms.

He caught her to him roughly, burying his face in her neck, and cried brokenly:

"God, God, Mildred! Help me do it—stick by me—don't let me weaken. I need you—I can't live without you!"

§ 3

But the following morning he was by no means sure that that was what he ought to do. It was borne in upon him, too, that in leaving home the evening before, staying away the night, he had given Peggy further evidence—convincing this time—of his unfaithfulness. She would be furious with him, might now even want to leave him. Even so, he was a long way from wanting to leave *her,* or from giving up Danny, Johnny, Jane, Margaret, and Dick.

That afternoon, he took an early train home, anxious to find out what his reception was to be. It was as bad as his worst fears. Peggy met him with cold, stern eyes and would not speak. Neither at dinner nor later did she address him. There was even no pretense of friendliness before the children. They knew, all of them, that their parents were having a quarrel. Mom was mad at Dad; she wouldn't speak to him. Even fat, turbulent Kate, in the kitchen, was aware of the estrangement. There was no attempt at conversation by anyone during the meal. Peggy served the vegetables, passed the plates, spoke briefly to the children, a steely and an uncompromising hardness in her face and manner. Bart fled to his study and crept up the back stairs to his room as soon as the family were in bed.

There was no variation next day, or the next, or the one following. Apparently it was always to be so. The house was like a house with death in it. Bart came and went, talked as cheerfully as he was able to the children, brought them little gifts from town, tried to amuse them, regaled them with stories. He made no headway with his wife. Sometimes he caught the glint of tears in her wide dark eyes, but they did not fall. Her head she held high, and he knew better than to approach her with any words of conciliation.

"This can't go on forever!" he said, in disgust.

In the evenings he worked at his story, sometimes staying at his desk until past midnight, now and then getting in an hour or so of copying before breakfast.

He saw Mildred almost every day; if he did not see her, he telephoned. Frequently he wrote her from the office, particularly when he felt low-spirited. To his gloomy account of the dreary condition of affairs at home she listened sympathetically, at the same time with impatience, assuring him, as he assured himself, that such a state of things could not continue.

§ 4

The March issue of *Crosby's* was now on the newsstands, and Bart enjoyed to the full the glory of the literary spotlight. His fellow commuters on the train congratulated him—his name on the cover, author of the big serial! At the offices of *The Shoe Ægis,* he was sure he detected a new deference. His old publisher wrote him a honeyed letter saying he hoped to have the privilege of bringing out *The Hacienda* in the fall. In the windows of bookstores, or wherever magazines were sold, his eye promptly found *Crosby's,* and his own name in satisfying capital letters.

Perhaps it was his new sense of importance, perhaps it was a feeling on Mr. Max Solomon's part that his art editor was getting exalted opinions of himself—whatever the contributing cause, the clash between them, which Bart had long foreseen, suddenly took place. Mr. Solomon's voice was louder and coarser than usual one morning, and Bart rose wearily to his feet, saying indifferently:

"Aw, go to hell!"

"You're fired!" roared Mr. Solomon.

"I'm through," Bart corrected him.

§ 5

It was a satisfaction to telephone the news to Mildred, and her happiness, her congratulations warmed his heart. But

Peggy, he could not tell. He realized as much on his way uptown to meet Mildred for lunch.

How do it? Say what? At any rate, now was not the time. Yet where could he go, and what should he do with himself during the day, with no office needing him? It was impossible for him to remain at home, working in his study, with a resentful wife in the house who would not speak to him.

He laid this before Mildred when she joined him, breathless from excitement and the street.

"Why, my dear boy, why not come here and work? This room you're so fond of is just the place! You'll be quiet here, nobody will disturb you, and I'll come home every day at one o'clock, have lunch with you, and talk over the story. Then, if you want to take a little walk in the afternoon or go to a movie, why, that will be fine, and you can catch your usual train home to Port Washington, and Peggy'll be none the wiser.

"But, Bart dear, how long is this going to keep up? Don't you see you *can't* go on this way, deceiving Peggy, worrying about her? It isn't right—it isn't fair to yourself. How can you write, do your best work, when you're all upset?"

How indeed? How satisfy both women? He sighed heavily, despising himself for not having courage to solve the problem. He refused to consider parting from his wife and children; he would not give up Mildred.

Silently and alone he ate his breakfast, took his customary train, and when he reached the city, went to Mildred's apartment. There it was warm and pleasant; a fire would be burning, the desk cleared, and there would be a little note of affection with a wish for a good morning's work tucked into a corner of the desk blotter.

In the quiet, pleasant room, with just enough stir and sound coming from Anastasia in the rear of the apartment to keep him from feeling lonely, he bent to his work. Mildred had told him the reception of *The Hacienda* assured him his next story would be accepted, and she was anxious to begin it after the final installment of the first. That this might be possible, it would be necessary for him to complete *The*

Alcázar by the end of May. The progress made by his uninterrupted morning's work pleased and surprised him, although he could not tell whether it was good or bad. Mildred reassured him. She criticized and suggested, firing his enthusiasm; the story grew and began to take on more and more of the adventurous, romantic quality which had so successfully characterized his earlier effort.

At a little before one o'clock, she would arrive to have lunch with him. Anastasia always had a delightful repast prepared. The maid came in noiselessly around the noon hour, while Bart was at work, quietly set the table—dainty lace doilies on the polished wood, shining silverware, the fragile green glasses, a bowl of fruit or flowers in its center. Bart delighted in these lunches; he was spent and hungry by the time they were ready. The food, the glass of wine, the companionship of Mildred were all perfect. The hour of relaxation was like warm, reviving sunlight.

In the afternoon, he would sit in a loge at a motion-picture house, or go to the matinée of a play, and at twenty minutes past five, take his usual train for Port Washington, to meet, when he reached his home, the hard, unforgiving countenance of his wife and the wondering, unhappy looks of his children. After the ordeal of dinner, he would shut himself up in his study and write. Upstairs the children would racket until bedtime; occasionally he would catch the sound of Peggy's gay, unrestrained laughter, and thrill to the tones of her natural speaking voice when some louder admonition to her brood brought it to his ears. When he had finished for the night, and the house was still, everyone asleep, he would close his binder, switch off the lights, go to the basement to replenish the furnace, then silently climb the back flights to his solitary room.

Dan Thornwall came over on Sunday mornings to drive Peggy, Kate and the children to early Mass. He did not accompany them. There was never any occasion to take the Dodge out of the garage.

Week-ends were terrible. He spent as much time as he could away from the house.

§ 6

One day Mildred burst in upon him at his work half an hour earlier than usual, and even before she had taken off her things or kissed him, he saw she was unusually excited.

"Wait, wait," she checked him, "wait until I have a cocktail. I can't tell you what's happened until I have a drink. Oh, Bart, it's just wonderful—wonderful—wonderful . . . ."

A Mr. Anderson, it appeared, had come to see her at her office several days previously. Mr. Anderson was a motion-picture agent, a broker, whom Mildred had known for many years. He had informed her a certain movie star was interested in *The Hacienda* as a vehicle for himself and had wired Mr. Anderson to procure for him, if possible, galley sheets of the balance of the story.

"So, I dug up a dirty old set I had in my desk," Mildred hurried on, "and gave them to him, and this morning he came to see me—and, my dear, who, do you suppose, wants to buy and film your story?"

She kept Bart in suspense a moment, and then mentioned the star's name.

"You see, it just suits him—you know the kind of stuff he does—and he's crazy about it, Anderson says, wants to make it immediately, and—my dear, wait till I tell you: he offers *twenty-five thousand dollars for it!*"

Bart's face twitched, but he made no further motion. Mildred continued. She had told Mr. Anderson she could speak for the author, and that if he could promise her that the money would be forthcoming on the signing of the contract, Mr. Carter, she knew, would find the price satisfactory. The agent had assured her that there would not be the slightest difficulty about that, and Mildred had told him to go ahead and draw up the contract.

"Well, aren't you *thrilled?* You sit there looking at me like a perfect dummy! Think, my boy, what this is going to mean to you! Twenty-five thousand dollars! Why, my goodness, Bart, you're *made;* nothing can stop you now. You haven't a notion what publicity you're going to get out of this, and you needn't worry about money again as long as you live. They'll take everything you write now—editors, publishers, producers. All you will have to do is to decide what you want to write. Why, that's five years' salary, do you realize it? Five times the amount that old spider Solomon was paying you for a year's work on *The Shoe Ægis!*"

§ 7

Five years' salary! Bart kept repeating the phrase after Mildred had left him. . . . . Five years' salary!

The thought of so much money did not elate him. He was conscious only of sadness and depression.

The past ten years of grubbing work, the years of makeshifts, worry, and poverty which he and Peggy had shared, rose up in memory to confront him. He recalled the first months of their wedded life, when she had so often walked over to Third Avenue to bargain with butcher or vegetable vendor for two pounds of rump beef and a handful of carrots, onions, and greens. He remembered the days when Danny was on the way, how she had skimped, saved, and denied herself small comforts, the simplest of luxuries, so that there might be enough money on hand to pay the doctor and the hospital bills when they came due. He remembered the dresses she had made for herself at the time—the plainest of print cottons—and how she had cooked, washed, darned, and planned to save dollars and quarters, nickels and dimes. He remembered, too, the succeeding years, when Johnny had followed Dan, Janey followed John, Margaret and Dickey had come along in turn. Peggy had never whimpered nor complained. She had borne each child with fortitude and faith, loving it from the moment she knew she was to have it, sorry only for him and the additional burden imposed!

Twenty-five thousand dollars!

His heart suddenly cried out.

Twenty-five thousand dollars? What did it mean to him? Couldn't he go to her, lay it before her, and have her rejoice with him as she had always done whenever a windfall came their way? What was the value of money to him if the joy of its unexpectedness and the fun of spending it was not to be shared with her?

Here was concrete evidence he could write, make money with his pen! The movie star was not paying twenty-five thousand dollars for a story without merit! Mildred Bransom had had nothing to do with *that*. Peggy would have seen so much for herself.

Oh, where was there any health in life? Where had all the sanity and the goodness and the self-respect and the joy in it disappeared?

Mildred?

What the devil did she matter? She did not need him. Peggy *did*.

Mildred had her job and her work; they absorbed her. She had said so herself.

Peggy had only him and the kids.

Suddenly it came to him he must see Peggy, go to her at once, make peace with her, win her back.

He caught a taxicab in the street and drove to the Pennsylvania Station.

On the train he realized how rotten and contemptible he had been—vacillating, uncertain of mind, swayed by passing emotions, influenced by any favoring wind that blew his way, trimming his sails to it . . . .

Oh, God, what a bum he was!

But he saw clearly at last. The rose glasses had fallen from his eyes. What was the worth of life without children and a wife beside him? What was the use of work, of advancement, of success? What was the satisfaction in becoming a writer if Peggy and the kids were not to share in its rewards? . . . .

Mildred be damned!

He would forcibly take Peggy in his arms; he would tell her how sorry he was—oh, how terribly, terribly sorry! He would tell her he'd make it up to her. He just wouldn't *let* her be angry with him any more. He'd make a complete confession of the whole miserable affair—a clean breast of it—and he'd beg her, implore her to take him back, give him one more trial. She loved him—ah, God. he was sure of that! And he loved her. He'd make her realize it. Why, he'd never stopped loving her for a single instant! He'd never see Mildred again; he'd tell her so. And with that twenty-five thousand dollars he and Peggy and the kids would pull up stakes and clear out of Port Washington, get away from New York, find a farm some place up in Connecticut where he could write and write and write.

"Ah, Peggy—muggins—you must forgive me—you've just *got* to!"

He almost ran the whole way home from the station, shaking with eagerness and excitement. Oh, what had he been thinking of? He'd been sick—that was it—*sick*, mentally *sick!* But now, now he was well again!

His house and the grounds about it looked so imposing and in such nice order as he hurried toward it. The old feeling of pride came back to him. It was an impressive looking place. He sprang up the front steps, burst open the door, flung his coat to the closet floor, glanced in turn into the sitting room, his study, the kitchen. All was in order, but nobody was about. He bounded upstairs. There, too, the rooms were deserted. The beds were made, the furniture in position, the tops of the bureaus bare, nothing out of place. There was not so much as a stray toy upon the floor.

"Pegsy!" he shouted. "Hi, Pegsy!"

Then it came to him the house was cold. He touched a radiator. There was no heat.

He stood still, listening.

Quietly, then, he descended the stairs, entered the kitchen, examined ice chest, storage closet, the shelves in the pantry. Returning, he went to his study. On the large blotter which covered the part of the desk where he wrote lay a key ring with the three keys to the house. Jingling them in his hand, he ascended the stairs again, and once more looked into all the rooms. Even the closet in Kate's room was bare of clothes; there were a few coarse hairpins and a spill of powder on the bureau top. The room Peggy had occupied was as empty of her things as if it had never been used. He noticed that even the bureau drawers and the shelves in the closet had been freshly lined with white paper. A small picture of himself in a silver frame remained on her dressing table; a larger one hung where it had always hung, beside her bed head.

His own room was exactly as he had left it, his trousers hanging upside down—caught by their cuffs in the top drawer of his narrow chiffonier. Nowhere could he discover a note.

He wandered back through the deserted rooms. Their silence frightened him; their coldness caught at his marrow.

On the floor of the room Janey had shared with the baby, a white object drew his eye. It was one of Dickey's socks; he remembered Peggy knitting it, and how she had debated putting a band of blue or a band of red around the top. He picked it up, studied it for a little, then gently crushed it in his palm and put it in his pocket.

BOOK V

1930

CHAPTER I

§ 1

THE smartly uniformed attendant within the grilled portals of the Stanislaus Club took Bart's hat, coat, and stick, and in answer to his question said respectfully:

"Mr. Henry Carter is waiting for you, sir; he's on the third floor. He told me to tell you to come right up as soon as you arrived."

There was an air about the Stanislaus Club. It was different from that which pervaded the Players, the Lambs, and the Lotus, where Bart belonged. Henry's club was referred to sometimes as "the millionaires' club," and while it was true many rich men made up its membership, there was nothing ostentatious about it. Rather it was "elegant"; Bart liked the word in its connection. He had been his brother's guest there on two or three occasions and had always responded pleasantly to its atmosphere.

Gill met him with a lean cordial hand as he stepped from the elevator cage.

"Mighty glad you could come, Mr. Man. I was lonesome as the devil, so thought it might be pleasant to lunch and have a talk. There's nothing doing in New York on a rainy January afternoon."

Bart glanced at his brother's lined, cadaverous face and thought he looked "liverish." Golf, he knew, was what kept Gill in good physical trim, and this reflection suggested the question:

"No Florida this winter?"

"It's the damn market," Gill replied; "if the old thing would ever settle down and make up its mind what it was going to do, I could get away. I'd like to go down to Nassau the end of this month; that is, if Alice can be persuaded to forego Palm Beach."

"How *is* Alice?' Bart asked.

"Oh, well. You know. Alice's always the same, bored and tired. She wastes her energy doing the most ridiculous things."

"And Sylvia?"

Gill's deeply creased face instantly lighted.

"Ah, Sylvia!" He put his chin in the air, rubbing it contentedly with long bony fingers.

"Well, tell me," Bart insisted, amused by his brother's obvious satisfaction at the thought of his daughter.

"Sylvia's nineteen," her father declared. He seemed to think he conveyed all that was necessary in the statement. Bart shook his head in despair.

"You're hopeless," he said.

"Well, let's have a drink," Gill suggested; "if you really want to hear, I'll tell you while he's making it."

He started for the bar, but stopped upon encountering a fellow member.

"Oh, Marcus—just a moment, old boy. I want you to meet my brother . . . ."

A portly gentleman took Bart's hand, and eyed him soberly from under bushy eyebrows.

"Always glad to meet a friend of Henry Carter," he said ponderously, "and particularly a brother——" Gill interrupted:

"I didn't stop you, Marc, just to shake hands with a brother of mine. I'm *his* brother! This is Bartholomew Carter, the novelist!"

The bushy eyebrows went up, and the large plushy hand tightened its clasp.

"My dear Mr. Carter, I'm delighted." He pumped Bart's arm. "I read every blessed thing you write. That last—the title escapes me for a moment—was a corker, but my favorite will always be *The Alcázar*. God, there was a story! I took all the family to see it when it was shown at the Strand."

Smiling perfunctorily, Bart nodded. He never knew quite what to say when people praised his stories.

At the moment, another man, hurrying by, paused, hesitated, and touched Gill's arm.

"I say, Henry," said this individual, "introduce me too, will you? I'm on my way to lunch with the wife, and it would please her, I'm sure, if I told her I'd just met your brother."

"You're much admired in my family," the man said to Bart, as Gill complied; "we all read you, from the youngsters up."

Bart threw an appealing look at Gill, who presently rescued him.

While they were waiting for their cocktails, Bart said:

"I am awfully fed up on that sort of thing. . . . . Oh, don't misunderstand me; I'd miss it if I didn't have it occasionally; it's all pleasant enough, but it embarrasses me."

"I get you," Gill said, "but I had a little apple-polishing to do; I thought it wouldn't hurt me to have Marcus Macaulay meet you; he's chairman of the board of the Holman-Mandrake Corporation; I knew he'd be pleased; he's a regular snob about writers. And the other man . . . . you know who he is?"

Bart pleaded ignorance.

"He's John Oliver Pringle, president of the Jefferson Trust."

As if impressed, Bart frowned and nodded. These successful business men meant little to him. He had never heard of the Holman-Mandrake Corporation, and only vaguely of the Jefferson Trust. It was all right for his brother to hold such men in esteem; Gill was a Wall Street man himself, was "in the game," appreciated the value of influential acquaintanceships.

Bart was conscious of feeling fagged and was impatient for his cocktail. He smoothed his vest over his stomach and sighed. The previous evening he had gone to a stupid dinner where he had foolishly eaten and drunk injudiciously. When his man, Burns, had interrupted his morning work to say that Gill was on the telephone and wanted him for lunch, Bart had been of two minds about accepting; now he devoutly wished he had declined.

"Well," he said apathetically, "you were going to tell me about Sylvia."

Gill waited a moment for the bar attendant to fill their glasses, then lifted his own, glancing over the top of it to catch his brother's eye.

"Here's to her," he said. Bart in two swallows emptied his glass.

"Ha-h—excellent," he pronounced; "another, please."

"We had fun while she was down for the holidays," Gill went on. "I didn't know whether she'd have engagements or not, so I mapped out a program for every day, but, bless my soul, the child was booked almost full. There were several dances, and she went to them all. My, my, Bart, you should see the way the boys flock after her! They're like bees after honey. But she can manage 'em; you ought to see her!"

"Does she like Vassar? It's her second year there, isn't it?"

"Well-l-l—" Gill drew out the word—"she likes it as much as any normal girl likes college. She likes it for the good times she has there, but I suspect she doesn't enjoy studying any too well. But, my, she's lovely! The sweetest thing you ever saw. She's just *beautiful,* and isn't in the least spoiled, not so far as I can see."

"I suppose she'll be getting herself married soon to a son of one of your millionaire friends, and that will be the last you'll see of her."

Gill smoothed his hollow cheeks.

"Sylvia's a bit different from most girls. She likes her daddy pretty well, and passed up several engagements just to spend an evening with me at the theater. Oh, I used to take her round to the night clubs. . . . . Indeed I did!

"I *want* her to marry some day. I'd like to see her marry young. There'll be grandchildren, I hope. Oh, you can grin," he said, as he observed Bart's indulgent smile, "but I'm nutty about children."

"You're getting to be a fatuous old ass about your daughter," Bart observed.

"Perhaps," Gill answered. "But you don't know, Mr. Man; Sylvia's about all I live for!"

Bart sipped his second drink and reflected. He was aware his brother and Alice did not get on any too well together. Alice went in for society and trips to Europe.

"I had a letter from Jack the other day," Gill announced. "Let's go in and eat, and I'll tell you what he said."

He preceded Bart to the spacious dining room. Down its center stretched a long, beautifully polished mahogany table, bright with sparkling silver. On either side, reaching down about midway, ranged a score or so of middle-aged men.

"Shall we sit at the long table or take a small one by the window?"

Bart shrugged his indifference.

"Let's herd with the bunch, then; there are not too many to-day."

As they proceeded toward two vacant places, Bart recognized Emil Renard, the critic and lecturer, and Harvey Kenyon, the same Harvey whom he had once known so intimately as a freight clerk in San Francisco, but now Harvey Sheldon Kenyon, a director, vice president or something, of one of the largest downtown banks.

Fifteen years ago, soon after Bart and Peggy had moved to Long Island, he had met Harvey one day on the street and had asked him down to Port Washington for the week-end. Since then, Harvey had had a sky-rocketing career. His rise in finance and banking had been miraculously rapid. He had married into the Vanderventer family, had become a rotund, sedate personage, going in for philanthropy and charitable enterprises. Of late, Bart had met him on several occasions, always when he went to the Stanislaus, now and then in theater lobbies. They greeted each other cordially, but had no opportunity to do more, although both were conscious of a desire to pick up the broken threads of their friendship.

Bart nodded to Harvey and to Renard as he passed them, his attention being diverted by Gill introducing him to the men who sat nearest the places they were to occupy.

"Doctor Scott, my brother, Bartholomew Carter; Mr. Curtis, this is my brother, Bartholomew Carter; Jerry shake hands with my brother . . . ."

It was obvious Gill enjoyed this. He pronounced Bart's name in a tone loud enough to carry to the rest of the table.

Bart was touched by his pride. In this atmosphere, the atmosphere of wealthy business men, he realized that his presence was considerably more of interest than if Marcus Macaulay, or the other man, the president of the Jefferson Trust, had appeared at the Players or the Lambs. Writers, actors, poets did not often pass the portals of the Stanislaus. He caught glances in his direction, heard his name whispered. Most of the men knew of him; many had read his books. Their interest amused him. It neither flattered nor annoyed him.

His food when it appeared was delicious—Gill invariably ordered with imagination and discretion—and the meal ended with a marvelous rice pudding.

As his demi-tasse was served, Harvey Kenyon came to take the vacated seat next to him.

"I wish we could get together, Bart," he said earnestly. "It's been too many years since we did. I remember so pleasantly my visit to your place on Long Island. That's a long time ago, and a lot has happened since then. I'd like to sit down and review the years."

Bart agreed with him. It taxed him somewhat to see in this partly bald, paunchy, sedate gentleman, the harum-scarum Harvey of "Abbey" days. His ready smile, his manner, a lurking twinkle in his eye were all that remained of the boy he had once known so well and of whom he had been so fond.

"I've followed your career with the greatest interest," Harvey was saying; "I remember beginning your first story when it was serialized in a magazine—*Crosby's,* wasn't it?" He leaned forward to talk to Gill.

"You know, your brother and I used to be great cronies out in San Francisco 'bout the time of the fire."

"Yes," Henry assented; "I've heard him mention it."

"We used to cut some pretty fancy capers in those days," pursued Harvey; "but they weren't vicious, were they, Bart? Just youthful obstreperousness, eh?"

He seemed anxious for Bart to confirm this. Bart did.

"I remember 'The Abbey.' Great bunch of boys, weren't they?"

"Great bunch," Bart admitted.

"Wonder what's become of them."

"Made good in one way or another. Meet once a year, you know; have a reunion, an annual banquet on the anniversary of the fire."

"Is that so? Well—well! I left San Francisco in 1908. It's twenty-two years since I saw California. Now, how about our getting together some night?" His eye suddenly lighted; he went on eagerly, "Say, you couldn't dine with us to-night, could you? Happen to be free? Mrs. Kenyon and I would be delighted. We're giving a little dinner for some very charming people we met abroad, Lady Fitzsoben and her daughter, the Honorable Constance—most, most *charming* folk! Come, won't you? It will give Mrs. Kenyon and me *such* pleasure."

Bart hesitated and was lost.

"Splendid, old fellow. An eminent novelist will add distinction. And—oh, I say—how stupid of me! We shall expect Mrs. Carter, of course. I had such a delightful impression of her when I visited you at Port Washington. I'm afraid Mrs. Kenyon will not have time to call, but I will see that she sends a note by messenger to her this afternoon."

"Mrs. Carter is in California," Gill volunteered.

Harvey's face politely clouded.

"Ah, well, that's too bad, but we'll expect *you*. Eight o'clock at 300 Park Avenue. After coffee, you and I will slip away together and catch up on everything."

He departed with a warm shake of Bart's hand and a clap on Henry's shoulder.

Bart groaned.

"It's all your fault," he said, aggrieved, to his brother.

"*My* fault? How you mean?"

"Oh, for bringing me here and exposing me to such bores."

"He's an old friend of yours!"

"Perhaps, but that's nearly twenty-five years ago. Now he's married wealth, thinks wealth, exudes wealth."

"Sh-h-h," Gill warned him, glancing about apprehensively.

"'Lady Fitzsoben,' and the 'Honorable Constance,'" Bart went on miserably. "I know exactly how dreadful it's going to be. Why *didn't* I say 'no'?"

"Oh, come, come," Gill said. "Kenyon's not so bad, and his wife's very much a personage. He's a big man, one of the heavy backers of the Republican party. Everybody round here thought Hoover'd send him to France when Herrick died . . . ."

Emil Renard came up as Gill and Bart rose. He wished first to introduce his host—Judge Somebody-or-other—and next to ask if Bart would be his luncheon guest at the literary French circle to which he belonged; the circle met on Tuesday. But Bart was not to be trapped a second time. He declined, hurriedly excusing himself, saying he had some telephoning to do.

§ 2

Some minutes later, the brothers found themselves in a quiet corner of the library on an upper floor, with some excellent Havanas Gill had provided.

"You haven't told me what Jack had to say," Bart prompted.

"Ah, yes. Well, he's thinking of taking a trip around the world."

"Trip around the world?"

"Yes; he and Jane. Says he thinks he'll have to sell the old ranch."

Bart frowned.

Gill made an expressive gesture with his hands, letting his gaze follow the soft billowing smoke from his cigar.

"He mentioned that Peggy doesn't want to stay at Los Robles any more."

"*Peggy* doesn't?"

"That's what he said. She objects to the Japanese. My, my, they must be a nuisance! The schools are flooded with them, Jack says, and Peggy doesn't want the—ah—your daughters to go there. How—how old are your girls now?"

Bart reflected.

"Let me see," he said; "Janey was born in '14. She's—by God, she's sixteen this month! Margaret's two years younger."

"Well, now that's just it. I suppose they're both in high school—I suppose Carterville boasts a high school! Jack says some of the Japanese boys in the girls' classes are twenty and twenty-two years old. Peggy doesn't like it."

Bart, in turn, studied the curling smoke.

"Jack says," Gill continued, "he might as well turn over what remains of Los Robles to the Japs and clear out. Jack's pretty well fixed, I imagine."

"Yes?"

"He bought Carterville property some time ago. The town's grown tremendously. He owns some nice business corners on the main street . . . . sold some of the ranch property, too."

"My God," Bart commented dispassionately. He thought of Los Robles as he remembered it as a boy, with the great sweep of range stretching from La Canada Heights on the east to barren Rincón de Romas on the west.

He wondered where Peggy would take the children if Los Robles was sold. Gill answered his thoughts.

"Your wife's thinking of moving up to Palo Alto."

Bart was jolted out of his indifference. He sat upright in his chair and turned sharp eyes upon his companion. Gill explained.

"The boy's going to Stanford University, isn't he? Perhaps you didn't know that."

Yes, Bart did. He remembered now. His son had written almost a year ago that he intended to go to Stanford, had mentioned it again in a more recent letter. Dan had said he was studying hard, preparing himself for college board "exams". . . . . So that was the plan! Bart understood, now. The family'd move to Palo Alto, rent a house there, Dan would enter Stanford, and the children attend public schools.

"Jack says, if he sells the ranch, he and Jane may take a year's cruise on the *Adriatic*. If he doesn't sell it by the time Peggy's ready to leave, he intends to travel anyhow. That will bring him here—if he comes this way!—sometime next fall——

"My, my," Gill broke off to add, "I haven't seen that twin brother of mine . . . . let's see: I left California in 1905. It's all of twenty-five years! Just think of it! Course, Sylvia and Alice saw him and Jane in the summer of '27. Sylvia liked all the family."

"She see Father Francis?"

"Oh, indeed yes, but the old boy isn't very well these days, I understand. They had him in a sanitarium when she was out there, but she went to visit him a couple of times. Josh's looking after him. . . . . Yes, and she went to see Camilla and that ineffectual book dealer she married—forget his name."

"How're *they* getting along?" Bart asked.

"First rate, I believe. Think that's what Sylvia told me. They have a nice little bookshop right in the heart of Los Angeles. She said Cam had beautiful snow-white hair."

"White hair, eh? Why, how old is Cam now?"

"Pretty near sixty. She's five years older than I am. That just about makes it.

"You know," Gill continued with an amused air, "it kind of tickled me, all this family stuff. Sylvia was quite keen on it when she went to California. Course, her mother high-hatted 'em all—but Sylvia got a real kick out of looking up the folks.

"It kind of tickled me," Gill repeated. "Course, I haven't written to anybody back there—my, since I don't know when! —and naturally all of 'em had forgotten that I was alive. And then Sylvia goes out there and says she's old Gill's daughter! Well, it made some of 'em sit up and rub their eyes. I got a flock of letters all at once, telling me what a fine girl I had, and giving me all the latest family news. Course, Sylvia, the little devil, just did it to please me. She knew every one of 'em would write; I suspect she put 'em up to it. . . . . My, my, Bart, Sylvia's a lovely child!"

"Did she happen to see Eva Ann or Tilly?"

"No, she didn't get around to them. Saw the boys, of course, and something of Trudie. Tells me Trudie's husband has sort of gone off his head or something; don't understand what's wrong. Josh—who seems to be the big gun out there in the doctor line—has him in an institution, told her it was 'for observation,' but I s'pect it something more than that. Course, Sylvia went down to the ranch. Motored over with her mother, I believe, from Del Monte. She saw Jack and Jane, and all *your* family. Says you've got a great bunch of kids, Bart."

"Yes, guess I have," Bart agreed tonelessly.

"You don't think you'll ever patch up your difference with their mother?"

Bart slowly waved his cigar through the smoke before his face.

"I did all I could," he said.

"You mean, when you were out there?"

"Yep."

"And she wouldn't take you back?"

"Wouldn't even *see* me."

Gill waited a moment.

"What was all the trouble about?"

Bart blew out a thin plume of smoke and watched it balloon softly toward the ceiling.

"Just one of those things," he said dully.

The other pulled his chin.

"How long's it been now?"

"Ten years."

"What happened when you were West?"

Again Bart paused.

"As soon as I found out where she'd gone, I followed. Went straight to San Francisco to see Father Francis and Josh. I talked things over with them. I told 'em everything, said I'd do what I could to patch things up. I'd agree to anything so long as she'd take me back."

"And they told you?"

"Oh, Father Francis went down to Los Robles, spent a day and a night there, brought Jack back with him. We four had it out. Peggy was hard as nails. Just wouldn't see me; that was all there was to it."

"Did you write her?"

"Sure. But they all advised me to wait a while, urged me not to force things . . . ."

His voice trailed off to nothingness.

"Guess there aren't many marriages that turn out happily," Gill observed.

Bart drew a quick inhalation and knocked the ashes from his cigar.

"After that I went to Hollywood, where they were filming my first story," he went on. "I spent six months there . . . ."

Once more he let his words die away, and Gill allowed him to take his time.

"Then," Bart resumed slowly, "I came back here . . . ."

His tone implied he was not done, and Gill waited.

"I went to Europe that summer, returned to New York in the fall, went again the following year, and that time stayed two years. I took a villa in Sicily. We lived at Taormina."

Both men were conscious of the plural pronoun. Neither spoke.

"That was a funny mess Josephine got herself into last year," Gill said, offering a new subject.

"Wasn't it?" Bart agreed, matching his brother's changed voice.

"What was it all about? I only saw what was in the papers."

"Jo's become a r'arin', tearin' feminist"; Bart explained; "calls herself a 'woman's liberator'; inveighs against any kind of restriction affecting the liberty of women, believes they should have as much freedom as men."

"Well, don't they?"

"Jo doesn't think so. She's rabid on the subject. Suppose that's the result of her stay abroad."

"How long was she there?"

"Don't know exactly. She lived in Vienna for awhile, then went to Berlin, where I believe she did some studying and taught English to a German doctor's children. She finally obtained a physician's degree at the Brussels University Medical School.

"A couple of years ago, she came back here and took up birth control, associating herself with the work of a birth-control clinic down on Fifteenth Street. That was the place the police raided last April.

"Oh, somebody lodged a complaint against them. The state law permits a physician to give contraceptive advice when necessary for a patient's health. Jo and her outfit were accused of handing out information indiscriminately. I don't know who instigated the raid—don't believe anybody does—unless Commissioner Whalen . . . .

"Anyway, the police swooped down on 'em one day, busted up the place, arrested Josephine, another woman doctor, and three nurses, herded them into the Black Maria, took them over to the West Twentieth Street Police Station, and then to the Jefferson Market Court. Jo telephoned me from there, and I went down and bailed her out for three hundred dollars."

"And the upshot?"

"Nothing. The judge discharged them all after a month of rowing and unpleasantness; guess it was a pretty disagreeable experience all round. Jo was furious."

"How does she reconcile her views with Catholicity?"

"She doesn't; she says she's emancipated from all that, won't call herself a Catholic any more because of the Church's antagonistic stand in the matter, describes herself as a 'Deist', and is going about the country lecturing. She believes birth control is the cure for most human ills. Last time I heard from her, she was in St. Louis, headed west."

"I don't know as I think birth control's such a good thing," Gill observed. "It lets a lot of women get out of having children who ought to bear them. Most women are scared to have a baby, or if they do and have a rotten time, they won't have another. It's a terrible experience, I guess, to give birth to a child; at the same time, if women didn't know how to prevent conception, they'd *have* to have more children. Nature intended women to bear children, and it seems to me it doesn't do a woman any good, nor society either, to monkey with Nature."

"What about women who have too many children?" Bart asked. "Look at Eva Ann and our respected Aunt Lizzie. Babies, one after another, ruined Eva Ann. Birth control would have saved her. That's what Jo's fighting for.

"It's only this," Bart continued, as his brother did not reply, "women of means can get all the information they want from their family physician about how *not* to have children; poor women can't, and they bring ruin on themselves and weak, sickly children into the world because they don't know how to prevent it.

"The trouble is they are ignorant; they don't know there is a way out. You see, Gill, there's a federal statute, passed in 1873, which forbids the mails being used for sending out information regarding contraceptive methods. There's a five hundred dollar fine and a jail sentence of five years. Most states have similar laws, and a doctor is liable to get himself into trouble if he gives birth-control advice. Such laws are a disgrace to our national intelligence, and the federal statute ought to be promptly repealed."

"Why isn't it?"

"Congress is afraid, I suppose. Catholics and a great many people think it's a good law. Some physicians approve of it."

"If the information was accessible to all, it might be bad for the country," Gill hazarded. "There doesn't seem to me there are as many children as there used to be."

"Take a look on the East Side or in the Italian quarter."

"Well, of course, but I was thinking of people we associate with. Our parents had nine of us; there aren't many couples you and I know with more than one or two children."

"Ours is the very class that *should* have 'em; not the illiterate and unhealthy riffraff down in the Ghetto!" Bart said, with momentary heat.

He scowled at his cigar.

"It would save a lot of misery in many marriages," he observed, after a little.

The note of bitterness in his voice did not escape his brother.

"I'd like to say this," Gill offered, after a moment's thought, "children are—I coined the phrase myself—old folks' insurance for happiness. The more a man and a woman put into children, I mean the more they invest in them when they're young, the more joy and satisfaction they have in life when they themselves grow old. I'm fifty-three, and I don't know what I'd do without Sylvia. I'm not interested in women, my business more or less takes care of itself; she's all I've got that makes life worth living to me. When I'm sixty-three, she'll be nearing thirty, having children of her own, giving me *grand*-children. Kids keep a man young. . . . .

"Well, well," he said with a brusque change in his voice, as if ashamed of these sentimental observations, "what's your next book going to be?"

Bart drew breath. It took him a moment to shake off his depression.

"Oh," he said, "I don't know. I'm sort of plugging away at one of the usual romances. I don't know as I'll finish it. I've all the money I need. There's no particular urge for me to work. I want to tackle something along entirely different lines.

"Say, Gill," he broke off sharply to say, "I'd like you to know this: I send Peggy and the children five hundred every month. I'd make it *twice* that if she'd let me. She won't accept a penny more, and Jack had a hard time persuading her to take even the five hundred.

"About the next book," he hurried on, forestalling comment, "I thought I'd try my hand at something of old Spain, Spanish romance, you know—bull-fighters, muleteers, that sort of thing. I've never been to Madrid or Seville. I thought I might take a run over there this year——"

"You ought to go pretty soon, if you're going; you mustn't miss Easter week in Seville. My, it's a sight; you'll remember it all your life. Alice, Sylvia, and I went in '22."

"That was the year *I* was abroad."

"Yes, I know. I tried to locate you through the American Express in Paris, and then I saw in the Paris *Herald* you and . . . . well, it said 'Mr. and Mrs.'—were at the Excellsior in Rome. The damn issue was a month old, so I didn't know *where* you were by that time."

§ 3

They came out of the club together about four o'clock and paused on its steps. Gill's luxurious limousine rolled up and stopped, the chauffeur descended, obsequiously opening the car door.

Gill glanced at the gray sky and felt the sharpness of the air with his shoulders. The day had turned cold, but the pavements still were glistening wet from the warm weather which had prevailed for the last few days.

"Believe I'll walk," he announced; "need the exercise, and there isn't a blessed thing to do when I get home. Alice shuts herself up in her room with her maid and God knows what other domestic—bathing, manicuring, and dressing herself. I shan't see her till dinner time. Suppose you couldn't come out and dine with us?"

Bart reminded him of the engagement with Kenyon.

"But I'll walk part way with you," he offered.

They started off in the direction of the Avenue.

In the late Saturday afternoon, the streets were teeming with people. A steady stream of cars set in either direction along the north and south thoroughfares. Muddy water sprayed from their wheels, traffic signals alternately glowed red or green, here and there lights commenced to illuminate the darkening interiors of shops and stores. A sense of bustle and good-nature pervaded the hurrying throngs, while noises rose in clamorous thunder, punctuated now and then by sharp, staccato notes.

The two brothers were able to maintain but a desultory conversation; they were continually colliding with other pedestrians, forced to gauge their gait to theirs, were held up at corners and obliged almost to shout above the din. Gill, asserting there was no pleasure in such progress, jumped into an empty taxi caught in the jam, calling back through its open window, as he seated himself, he would phone soon. Bart continued alone.

His thoughts were all of his brother as he bent his steps homeward. Gill was rated as an extremely successful man; he was prominent in financial circles, a member of more than one good club, a director in several corporations; yet, in some way, Bart felt he had missed the very things in life for which, since he had left Los Robles a raw boy of seventeen, he had striven so hard to attain. His wealth, his success had little value for him now; his wife was estranged in every interest with the possible exception of the single one of Sylvia. Alice lived in a world of artificialities, spending her time in activities of no consequence, with vapid friends and social gadding. Gill's business activities no longer held him. Long ago he had been forced to relinquish his profitable connections with foreign governments, but he had made enough money out of these affiliations to be reckoned a millionaire. He had his money, his wife, his stone house on the Drive, his Rolls-Royce, his city and country clubs, but these no longer amused him. There remained golf, which Bart suspected he pursued principally as an agreeable form of killing time, and his daughter.

It had been only within the last year or so, that Bart had resumed relations with Gill. The latter had made the advances, admitting frankly he was proud of Bart's fame, was pleased to claim kinship. They had not much in common, having developed along different lines, and now they had reached middle-age with points of view regarding life and society widely at variance. Bart had been drawn to Gill by sympathy for him. His brother was lonely, and except for his devotion to Sylvia, talked and acted like a man who had met one disappointment after another. It was pathetic the way he turned to Bart, with the latter's fuller life and more engaging contacts, for companionship and confidences.

Bart was not at all sure what he thought of his brother. Since boyhood, Gill had lived solely for himself, cultivating profitable friendships, improving his circumstances, ignoring obligations. Gill was an opportunist, dulling his ears, shutting his eyes to anything and everything not immediately of service to him. Having won all he desired, he had come to his fifties to find nothing left for which to strive. And then, unexpectedly and undeservedly, within the past two years, Sylvia had suddenly blossomed forth, radiant and beautiful, filling her father's life to overflowing, and this belated affection, the only really unselfish love he had ever known, had softened and humanized him. Pathetic figure though he was to-day, Bart was conscious of a definite reservation in regard to his respect for him. He could not banish the memory of the time when Gill had left his mother, brothers, and sisters to shift for themselves at Los Robles, nor the early years of his own and Peggy's struggle in New York when a friendly hand or an encouraging word would have done much to hearten and make things easy for them.

Yet, withal, Bart was drawn to him. The older man reached out for companionship. The younger said to himself as he mounted the steps of the studio-apartment building in which he lived, perhaps he did Gill an injustice, perhaps the man had really changed at heart and had come to realize too late all that he had missed in life. He felt Gill's need of him.

CHAPTER II

§ I

HE OPENED the door with his latchkey. Burns, in the hallway, helped him remove his overcoat, took his hat and stick.

"Mrs. Carter home, Burns?"

"No, sir; Mrs. Carter's still out."

Bart passed into the lofty studio. He loved this room; he and Mildred had planned every detail of its furnishing. At one end was a tall, wide window of prismed glass and many panes, its glaring light tempered by thin gold gauze curtains which might be adjusted with a long bamboo pole; at night the whole could be obliterated by thick folds of turquoise-blue velvet. A balcony ran along one side with a rather precipitous staircase leading from it to the studio floor, and on the side opposite the great window stood a hooded stone fireplace of noble proportions which projected ten feet into the room. A large oil by Matisse, smaller canvases of Cézanne, Picasso, and other moderns, and an Italian altar cloth of matchless gold needlework surrounded by a dark plush crimson border, covered the bare paneling of the fourth wall. There were a black ebony piano, rugs, leather and upholstered chairs of Italian design and workmanship, a carved chest, massive gilded cathedral candlesticks, a broad flat-topped desk near the window, an escritoire a century in age, and bookshelves—shelves high and low, laden with books, crammed with books, overflowing with books. Bart enjoyed its comfortable confusion.

"My dear, it's *my* room," he had defended himself mildly to Mildred when she taxed him with its disorder. "I like it this way. It looks lived-in, used, and besides, it has the kind of atmosphere in which I can write. I never liked the spick-and-spanness of the Taormina villa."

The north window was a pale, luminous square to-night, filling the studio with ghostly light and ghostly shadows. Burns drew together the velvet hangings, and Bart jerked the chains dangling to three bulbs of a jeweled lamp which stood on the cluttered desk. Instantly the room was transformed into one of dim beauty and romance, the shadows deepening, softening, warm tones touching kindly the surfaces of the heavy furniture, caressing their outlines, spreading like a gracious tide over the heavily rugged floor.

In a small neat pile upon one of the extended slides of his desk lay the afternoon mail. Bart sank into his swivel chair, picked up his black-rimmed spectacles, fitted them to his ears. Invitations, a note from his publishers, one from a newspaper syndicate, other business communications—two envelopes stamped with the postmark "Carterville." He cast the rest aside and slit the flaps of these last with a steel opener. He had sent all his children wrist watches for Christmas. The first was from his son, John.

DEAR DAD:

The watch is a peach and was what I was very much in need of. It helps me to be on time for school. I am on the basket-ball team and I hope I can make the team. We played Guadalupe High last Friday night in their Gym, and beat them 39 to 30. I got a chance to start but the coach pulled me out when he thought I was hurt.

Dan is expecting to go to Stanford next fall. He has 13 college board credits and needs only 2 more but they are awfully strict up there. Guess I'll go to Cow College at Cal. Uncle Jack says he thinks that's the place for me. He wants me to study Viticulture but I'm not very stuck on it. He gave me a great little pony for Christmas. He's a mustang and we call him "Puzzle," because he's so hard to "get onto." (Joke!) He can go like the dickens.

As I can think of nothing more to say, I will close,

Your loving son,

JOHN.

The other letter was from Margaret, written neatly in up-and-down script. Bart shut his eyes to visualize her for a moment; she was fourteen, now. He held her letter beneath the lamp.

Dear Daddy:

That was a very thoughtful present you picked out for me and I thank you for it most warmly. It is very much admired by everyone who examines it.

Jane and I have been having a great deal of fun lately with a marionette theater. Aunt Camilla sent her a book about marionettes for Christmas, and Uncle Jack had a little theater built for us according to the speffications in the book. It is darling and Mother and Aunt Jane have been helping us make the marionettes themselves. Dan wrote a play for us to give and we asked some of our friends and charged a nickel for admission. They want us to repeat it at school.

Mother says we may not go back to school here next year. She has been writing to the Sacred Heart Convent at Belmont which is near Palo Alto where Stanford University is located. She would like us to go to the Convent I guess but it is too expensive. Uncle Jack says not to worry about that.

We have been having lots of rain lately. The weather has been inclement.

Jane says to give you her love and to say for her she will write soon. I join her in this affectionate message.

Your loving daughter,
Margaret.

P. S. We had a lovely Christmas. Aunt Tilly and Uncle Wyss came over from Guadalupe and brought Ted, Aggie and their Dan. Agatha is a nice girl and I like her very much, but Ted is a holy terror. He has a new shotgun. It is a Browning Automatic.

Bart let the sheets of the letter drift slowly into his lap. He tried to imagine what his children were like to-day: Dan nineteen, John fifteen months younger, Jane sixteen, Margaret fourteen, and Dickey, the baby, now a boy of twelve whom he would not know to-day! He conjured up a picture of Los Robles, and thought of these boys and girls in the old place, roaming up and down the stairs, bounding in and out of the house. He wondered what room each occupied, and who had the little one with the sloping ceiling next to the roof. He saw again the generous sweeping circle of lawn, the bordering flower beds and leafy laurels, the rambling old house with the green shutters which had so greatly improved its appearance; he saw too the gnarled and twisted giant oak trees, the ivy-covered stump of the one that had died, the tall water tank on top of its steel tower, straddling the ranch's office at its foot, and he saw the drooping line of ragged eucalyptus trees shedding leaves and bark upon the roofs of the cottages below, standing like stalwart sentinels guarding the homestead at their backs. A great, yearning homesickness came to him. . . . . Jack buying a horse for *his* son! Jack deciding the boy was to study Viticulture! Jack ordering a marionette theater for *his* girls, telling Peggy not to worry about the cost of a convent school!

Ah, she had been hard—*was* hard. She had punished him more severely than she knew!

§ 2

And yet, thought Bart, gazing vacantly into the shadows of the big studio, he had no right to feel resentful toward her, not any more, not after his last fatal error, when he had asked her to divorce him!

He was carried back to the talk he had had with Father Francis, Josh, and Jack, in San Francisco ten years ago. All had advised him to wait, telling him within a year, two at the most, Peggy was certain to relent, and Bart, repentant, had not been difficult to persuade, feeling that a time of probation was no more than he deserved. He had departed, determined to accept his sentence without protest and keep faith.

Hollywood had claimed him then to supervise the filming of *The Hacienda.* He had remained there for the rest of that year, until business and writing plans necessitated his return to New York. It was impossible not to meet Mildred. *Crosby's* wanted his next serial; he was obliged to confer with her. She understood definitely at the time the old intimacy was over, yet, as it became necessary to meet and talk with her about his plot, to seek her advice regarding details, he had gradually become aware of the old appeal, and in fear of his own weakness, he had abruptly sailed for England. There, in a delightful but lonely Sussex vicarage, he had settled down until the weather turned and cold rains drove him for the winter to the slopes of Fiesole. He had written his sons and daughters during that time, sending them little gifts, postcards, an occasional souvenir.

In the spring, once more in New York, he had written Peggy earnestly and humbly, reminding her his two years were up, imploring her to forgive him. By the same mail, he appealed to Father Francis and Jack, begging them to intercede for him, but both presently replied regretfully that Peggy still felt resentful, and all that either one of them had been able to get out of her was that she wasn't ready yet. She had won happiness at last, she said, and feared Bart would take it away from her. Jack added, with well meant kindness, that he was filling Bart's place to the best of his ability. Father Francis urged him to pray to the Holy Spirit.

That summer, from sheer loneliness, he had gone back to Mildred. They had been conferring with regard to his work, seeing each other frequently, and an occasion came when it had seemed natural not to part for the night. Things had drifted along then; his old affection had returned. She had been companionable, stimulating, amusing; he had grown to depend upon her, while thoughts of Peggy and the children faded away.

One day, after the first summer at Kennebunkport, Mildred started talking about marriage. She referred to it with more and more frequency, urging upon him its importance to them both, insisting that her position was anomalous, a source of annoyance and humiliation to herself. Mr. Crosby was aware of their relations; others in the office knew; it was coming to be gossiped about generally. She, who took such pride in him, who had aided him to become the widely known, popular writer that he was, wanted to take her place beside him as his real helpmate and acknowledged wife. It galled her to think of herself as Bart's mistress; she wanted to be nothing less than legally Mrs. Bartholomew Carter.

She gave him no peace on the subject. Weakly, knowing in his heart it was a mistake, he yielded, writing Peggy that since she would not accept him as a husband, would she take steps to give him his freedom. He had no reply, and presently when, again whipped to action by Mildred, he wrote a similar letter to Jack, he had from his brother a cold, unfriendly letter, stating that under no circumstances would Peggy consent to a divorce. If he, Bart, should start an action, both Jack and Jane would feel it their duty to do all in their power to help Peggy defend the suit.

Bart realized then how grievous an error he had made. For two starved, lonely years, he had existed in the hope that Peggy would forgive him; now that he had asked for a divorce, he knew she never would.

Mildred brooded over his wife's stand, resentment took on the proportions of hate and began to color both her nature and her life. She became critical and querulous, took offense easily, tongue and wit grew sharp and acid. Whenever annoyed by a real or fancied slight, she never missed the opportunity to rehearse what she had sacrificed, adding always that because of Peggy's selfishness, she was forced into her present humiliating position. She could always anger Bart by saying it was money Peggy was after, money, which she, Mildred, had helped him to make; Peggy hoped, when he died, she would get it for herself and her children. And when, rising to the bait, he would remind her that Peggy could have as much as a thousand a month, or even fifteen hundred if she wished it, Mildred would only sniff and shrug an incredulous shoulder.

In the summer of 1923, Jonathan Crosby dropped dead in the street, and during the next half year his executors arranged for the sale of his magazine to a book publishing company. Mildred did not take kindly to the new owners, nor they to her. After a few months of effort on both sides to adjust the relationship, she resigned, and her resignation was cheerfully accepted. Afterwards, she and Bart had gone to Italy, found their villa at Taormina, bought the *Vivace,* and with occasional sailing trips to Trapani, Tunis, and Naples, had remained happily in Sicily, lost to the world, for two years.

When compelled to return home, Bart intuitively felt that trouble awaited them. They had lived an untrammeled, happy-go-lucky life overlooking the Mediterranean, with 'Stasia and their Sicilian servants, their pigeons and their donkeys and donkey cart. Bart had worked to good purpose, had learned to swim and to sail, and in his sixty-foot schooner-rigged Italian fishing smack, equipped with an auxiliary gas engine, they had experienced some thrilling and wonderful adventures. Circumstances forced their homecoming. Mildred was having a miserable experience with an infected tooth, clumsily extracted by an American dentist in Naples. The infection spread to her eye, and she had suffered a great deal. The sight was seriously affected, and immediate treatment in the United States became imperative. Three weeks after their return, in order to save not only the sight of the infected eye, but the other one as well, she underwent an operation at Johns Hopkins, following which she was forced to lie in a darkened room with bandaged vision for thirty days, going to Baltimore at intervals for treatment during the succeeding six months. The experience increased her irritability and capriciousness. Often she flew into a violent rage, and Bart was hard put to it to pacify her. Throughout her time of anxiety and suffering, he had given her all his sympathy, schooling himself to be patient, but once she was well again, her disposition did not improve.

She missed her work, that absorbing interest in life which had been so vitally a part of her. Bart reminded himself of that. Her eyes had made it impossible for her to reënter the editorial field, and when the danger was past, there did not seem to be any opening for her—at least, none she was willing to accept. Mildred was proud, and the memory of her days of editorial power was precious to her. She wanted to be editor in chief, nothing less. While she waited, she wrote occasional editorials and articles, but met with no signal success in placing them.

§ 3

The rattle of a key and the brisk opening and closing of the door interrupted his thoughts. Mildred came in, smartly furred and dressed, a modish black hat snugly fitted to her head, permitting a few tendrils of her bright hair effectively to escape its edge. Beneath her arm she carried a package and her fawn colored handbag.

"Hello, dear!"

"Hello!" he answered. She came to where he sat and kissed him. Her thin cheek was cold and fresh from the street. She sat down and pulled off her gloves.

"Cigarette," she said extending a hand; "I've been dying for one ever since I left Eunice's. Dreadful tea! That horrible Poplewell person was there. . . . . Oh, haven't you any Melachrinos?" She poked her polished nail about in the silver box Bart had offered and wrinkled her forehead. "I don't see why Burns doesn't . . . . he knows I can't smoke any of this rubbish."

She accepted a cigarette of a different brand from the case Bart drew from his pocket, and lit it from his lighter, closing her bad eye to escape the smoke.

"What did you do with yourself? You were gone when I came down. I had a facial at eleven, bought a new hat at Joseph's, lunched at the Algonquin, and ran into Miriam Schlesinger with her boy friend, that actor chap, who looks like a sap to me. We went round to Jimmy's for a drink afterwards, but the man's serving positive rot these days. I refused to drink his stuff, so we took a taxi over to George's. We had a Benedictine apiece, and then I . . . . Oh, I don't know, ... poked about Saks' a bit, got myself some gewgaws, went to Eunice's affair, and came home.

"Bart, Eunice wants us to dine with her to-night. Freda, Serge Troskoff, and Nick Landers are coming. I said we'd be there about six-thirty. We're going to a new place she says is good, the Café de——"

"Sorry, my dear, I'm dated," Bart interrupted. "I promised Harvey Kenyon I'd dine with him."

"Harvey Kenyon?" Mildred frowned.

"Old friend of mine, chap I knew in San Francisco years ago, banker now, money and all that sort of thing. I met him at Gill's Club, and he rang me in on a party to-night."

Her frown deepened; she made an impatient sound with her tongue. "Break it," she directed.

"God, I'd like to, ... was roped in before I knew it. It's going to be one of those awful Park Avenue affairs; his wife belongs to the Vanderventer family; got his position through her. They're entertaining Lady Fitzsoben and her daughter, the Honorable Something-or-other."

Mildred's affected eye closed in a nervous spasm.

"You don't mean Lady Fitzsoben and the Honorable Constance?"

"Guess so."

"Why, my God, Bart, you know who they are! We've met them—*you* remember!"

He gave a doubtful head-shake.

"Why, certainly," she went on, with impatience, "they came into Palermo on their yacht when we were there in the *Vivace*. We dined on board, and hiked up Pellegrino the next day. They're delightful people. Is Captain Holbrook with them?"

"Sure I don't know."

She steadily regarded him, her brows still knitted.

"You're meeting them to-night?"

"Yes, I told you; Kenyon and his wife are entertaining them."

"Then, I'm certainly going along!"

Her words hung in the air. Bart shrugged, twisted his mouth, elevated an eyebrow.

"I don't think you'll get anything out of it," he said slowly.

"How d'you mean?"

"Well, it's kind of complicated. Harvey thinks my wife's in California; he visited us once years ago in Port Washington. Gill told him Peggy was out West."

"I don't see how that makes any difference."

"Well-l," Bart said with hesitation, "I didn't happen to say anything about you. Anyhow, Mildred," he hastened to add, "it isn't the kind of a party you'd like, nor that I do, for that matter."

He caught her deep frown. Foreseeing a storm, he pretended a sudden interest in his unopened letters.

"Oh, damn!" Exasperation and anger rang in her tone. She stood up brusquely, her gloves, handbag, and package falling to the floor as if she had swept them from her lap.

"G-god," she said, gutturally through her teeth, and began to pace up and down. Bart sighed inaudibly as he slit the envelopes. He knew he was in for a "scene"; he could hear Mildred angrily pushing the furniture from her path. In another moment, the tempest broke.

"It's that damn wife of yours, clinging smugly to her reputation and her cheap respectability that puts me in such a disgusting position. It's mean and con-*temp*-tible! And if you had any decency about you, or a speck of loyalty, you wouldn't accept an invitation to go places without me. I'm your wife in every sense of the word, and I deserve to be acknowledged!"

"Oh, come, Mildred," he said, stirred by her fling at Peggy, "*you* were the one who talked of liberty and freedom when we started out together."

"That didn't mean you were to leave me in the lurch, to shift for myself, after I had given you all I had—my life, my job, my looks—to make you a success. Why, you'd still be sorting cuts in a measly shoemaker's magazine if it hadn't been for me! *I* made you, *I* put you on your feet. I gave you my life—everything—to make you what you are to-day, and when it's my right to be invited to a dinner party, you haven't manhood enough to insist upon it or refuse to go! You've got a liver for a heart, and water for red blood!"

He raised his head sharply to fix her with a look, his brows drawn together in a black frown. He did not speak. Coldly he regarded her as she continued to rage. An ugly woman, when she was angry, he decided. Her face was blotched, her bad eye twitched and closed spasmodically, the tendons in her thin neck stood out like whipcords.

He was thinking: "Ah-h, go to hell . . . . go to hell . . . ." but there was no particular heat in the words as he thought them. For a moment, he had responded to her stinging phrases. That passed. He was aware only of boredom, now. As she began repeating her reproaches, working herself up to greater fury, he reached for his unread letters, rose, crossed the studio with deliberate step, and went out by the door which led to the corridor connected with his bedroom.

§ 4

Sometime after midnight, he returned from the Kenyon dinner and let himself into the apartment. The studio was cold. Glancing about in dissatisfaction, his eye came to rest upon the neat pile of logs in the stone fireplace, and he debated with himself whether or not to light them. Determined to be warm, he removed some of the larger logs, lit a match to the remainder, and as the flames began to mount, mixed himself a Scotch highball. Drawing up before the cheerful, crackling blaze a large straight-backed armchair, he established himself therein, setting his drink on one of its flat arms, while he held his lighter to the tip of a cigarette.

The dinner party had been a delightful surprise. He had sat next to the English duchess, and they had talked with interest of their meeting at Palermo, the power of the Mafia, Mussolini, yachting, bad weather in the Mediterranean, and she had described a hairbreadth escape when their boat had been wrecked off the coast of Sardinia. After dinner, Harvey had decoyed him away from the company into a small library, and there, over cigars and some excellent brandy, they had revived old memories. Harvey had blushed and laughed until the tears stood in his eyes on being reminded of some of their youthful escapades. Later in the evening, Bart had found himself next to the Honorable Constance, a frank, toothy, voluble girl with a delightful English voice, who was even more entertaining than her mother. When leave-taking time arrived, he had been not a little pleased and flattered at being asked by Lady Fitzsoben, in that sudden and hospitable way characteristic of the English, to visit them at Nassau during February. They had a place there, it appeared, always spent from December to April in the Bahamas, the Kenyons were coming on the fifth or ninth, why couldn't he arrange to come with them? "Oh, that would be ripping, Mr. Carter," begged the Honorable Constance; *"do* come." "Capital idea, old-timer! We'll play Russian Bank on the steamer the way we used to." They all urged him, even the stately Mrs. Kenyon.

"And, of course, Mrs. Carter, too," Lady Fitzsoben said cordially, "if she's available."

"My wife's away," Bart told her; "she's in California."

"Charming, charming woman," Lady Fitzsoben commented. "I remember her so well in Palermo. That walk up Pellegrino! She's quite a sportswoman, I recall. *Do* remember me."

There might have been an embarrassed pause just then, or Bart may have only imagined it. He hurried to fill the gap, saying firmly but regretfully, it would be impossible to accept, but as his lips said "no," his heart cried out for "yes." He needed just that sort of a vacation; he wanted to go away, to go away *alone!* It was not possible; it would never be possible. There was Mildred. Mildred, Mildred, always and eternally Mildred!

§ 5

He awoke the following morning feeling ill. He had caught a heavy cold, either in the chilly studio the night before, or, more probably, when he had come out of the warm Stanislaus Club in the afternoon and walked home. There was a disagreeable tightness in his nose, and his throat was decidedly sore. He arose and gargled with aspirin tablets dissolved in water. Then, wretched and miserable, he shaved and bathed, slipped his feet into a pair of loose patent-leather pumps, put on a heavy silk dressing gown, and sought the fire in the studio. Burns brought him a breakfast tray and placed the bulky volume of the Sunday *Times* in the seat of a chair close by.

But his cold had robbed him of appetite, and his cigarette tasted foul. In the book-review section of the paper, he came upon glowing praise for a new novel by Edward Stanley Porter, a writer who produced books more or less in the same vein as his own. To cap his discomfiture there was a full-page advertisement of Porter's book. His own publishers had never accorded him the distinction of a full-page advertisement in the *Times*. He glanced at its headlines; the news was all uninteresting; he looked more attentively at the movie entertainments with the idea that he might kill the dull Sunday afternoon by seeing a picture. "George Bancroft in *The Mighty*"; "William Haines in *Navy Blues*." He threw the paper aside, gulped the last of his coffee, tossed his acrid cigarette into the fireplace, and sought his desk.

As he approached it, his spirits sank even lower, remembering he had abandoned his work the previous morning in keen dissatisfaction. For the past six weeks he had been engaged in the writing of a novel, tentatively called *The Alcayde*. It was essential to the plot that a certain character should be eliminated. "Killing him off," inventing an accident, was one way out of the difficulty, a means which Mildred was certain to urge, but such a solution struck Bart as inartistic, cheap, the worst kind of literary clap-trap. To get rid of the objectionable person adequately, convincingly, would take from fifteen to twenty thousand words, but Bart knew he could not afford to write so many and still keep his story within serial length.

That, so Mildred constantly reminded him, was what he must ever have in view when he worked. But he was tired of concocting romantic stories of early California history. He had written of the days of Junipero Serra and Gasper de Portala, of Juan Bautista Alvarado and Manuel Micheltorena, of Captain Fremont, of Sutter and the gold rush, of David Broderick and William Gwin, of the picturesque filibusters, Gaston Raoux and William Walker. None knew better than himself, his stories were all of one pattern. A reviewer had once called him the "G. A. Henry of modern novelists," and the phrase hurt. He was sick of that kind of work; he wanted to write something different, a book with a setting which had nothing to do with California, which would deal with the development of character rather than with moonlight, lovemaking and swashbuckling adventures. Yet every time he broached the idea to Mildred, she opposed him, firmly setting herself against any such departure from his beaten path.

"You've established your market," she would tell him; "editors, publishers, movie producers, the public, all expect a certain kind of story from you. Why spurn the hand that feeds you? Why kill the goose that lays the golden egg? It isn't fair to them; it isn't fair to yourself. You don't want to write a book which will disappoint everybody and be a horrible *flop,* do you?"

No, he didn't want to write a book like that. He enjoyed his popularity; it warmed him to think a hundred thousand persons waited impatiently for each of his books.

At the same time, he was weary of stereotyped work. As he sat at his desk, turning with a troubled hand the pages of his manuscript, he realized he was weary of writing. He thought longingly of Nassau, of bathing in the surf, idling on the sandy beach, meeting new people, living a different life.

Mildred opened the door on the balcony which led from her suite and descended the precipitous stairs. He glanced up as she came down, and smiled with involuntary pleasure. An exquisite picture she made, radiant, beautiful, gracious, in a trailing negligee of palest yellow silk trimmed with palest yellow lace. Her slim ankles were sheathed in saffron hose, her feet thrust into mules of brocaded yellow satin and yellow rhinestones, and there was that elusive reddish tinge in her carefully dressed and scalloped cap of golden hair. She was a vision, and her happy smiling face was as glowing as her costume.

"Aaa-aa-a," he said, drawing out the exclamation of involuntary admiration, "Queen Louise of Prussia!"

"Hello, darling," she said, tripping down the last three steps. "I was perfectly horrid to you yesterday, and I'm terribly ashamed of myself. I'm a selfish, disagreeable little bitch!"

She came to where he sat, put an arm about his head and neck, and gave him her fragrant cheek to kiss, then kissed him lightly in return with a peck of her rouged lips, laughing into his eyes.

"You *will* forgive me, old dear, won't you?"

"Of course," he said, his hands at her waist.

She stroked his hair.

"I don't know what was the matter with me. Tired, I guess. I felt frightful afterwards, so went over and told Eunice all about it. She said you ought to have horsewhipped me."

He smiled up at her without speaking, and she looked down fondly.

"I'd kiss you with a real good smack," she said, "if I wasn't afraid of getting lip red all over you."

"Never mind. I have a cold."

"Poor darling. Where did you pick that up?"

He explained without interest.

"I'd 've sat up, if I'd known, and made you a hot whisky and fed you aspirin."

"I made myself a drink."

"What time did you get in? We had a loathsome party. Troskoff was drunk as usual and spoiled everything. Nick brought me home at eleven. Tell me about Lady Fitzsoben and the Honorable Constance. Did they remember you?"

"Oh, yes." He described his evening briefly. "They sent you their best."

"They did, eh?"

"Somebody explained you were in California."

"Oh." Mildred shrugged a bony shoulder, and moved away leaving behind her a scarf of smoke. Bart looked at his manuscript, deliberating about bringing up the point which disturbed him, decided not to. He would kill off his troublesome character as he was certain Mildred would advise.

"It's cold, isn't it?" She had gone to the window, and now pressed a palm to its ribbed opaque surface.

"Suspect it is," he said inattentively.

"What's the weather like? I never thought to part my curtains; 'Stasia always draws them before I'm awake."

"Cold and rainy."

"Hell," she commented, without emphasis.

She plumed out another soft billow of cigarette smoke, and the cloud drifted across Bart's desk. He drew back in distaste, looking up, protest on his lips. In the strong light of the north window he could clearly see the thick enamel of make-up which coated her face. Mildred was thin. She had dieted when he first knew her; now there was no occasion for it; the past year or two had left her emaciated. In the garish window light, her haggard, creamed and powdered face, with its one sunken, discolored eye and richly carmined lips, looked like a death's head.

"God sake, Mil!" he exclaimed; "get out of that strong light; it doesn't become you."

She moved at once, sauntering with trailing draperies to the chair before the smoldering fire where he had had his breakfast. Presently he heard the newspaper rustling, and he concentrated on work.

Half an hour later, she interrupted him.

"What you doing to-day, Bart?"

"Working."

"Oh, I mean afterwards."

"Nothing."

"I told Eunice we might motor down with her to Great Neck. The Ryans want us for lunch."

He frowned at the back of her chair, his pen poised in his fingers. He did not want to lunch with the Ryans, he did not want to motor to Great Neck, he did not want to go out.

He said so, tempering his words.

"You go along without me," he proposed. "I feel absolutely done up; I wouldn't dare go out with this cold."

He waited, half expecting her to attempt to persuade him; he knew his words spelled disappointment. There was a silence for a long moment; Mildred rustled the newspaper. Then cheerfully she said, as if deciding to be generous:

"All right; I'll make your excuses. . . . . What do you want 'Stasia to cook for lunch?"

"Nothing."

"Oh, come now."

"Really, I don't want a thing."

"Nonsense! I'll have her make you some crêpes suzettes; she does them deliciously, and they're light, just the thing for your cold."

"I'd prefer coffee and dry toast."

"Pooh!" She brushed away his suggestion and rose. "I won't have you mope in here all day and consider yourself abused and martyred. I'll see you have a nice, delectable lunch, and I'll positively be home by six, and then, if you feel like it, we'll go out some place, or just stay in and have a bite here."

He knew he would not want to "go out some place" or "stay in and have a bite." He wanted to be *alone*—it didn't matter where, so long as he needn't have someone sitting opposite to whom he'd have to talk—least of all, Mildred with her sharp wit and tongue.

He picked up his pen grimly and leaned over his work. Mildred, the soft draperies of her yellow robe floating after her, her laces fluttering, marched to the pantry door, pushed it open, and disappeared from sight.

§ 6

She went upstairs presently to make herself ready for the Ryan luncheon. Eunice was to send the car for her at twelve-thirty, and Bart was thinking that as soon as she had gone, he would stop his miserable pretense at work, cancel the order for the crêpes suzettes, ask Burns to make him a hot whisky toddy, and get into bed with a book, when the telephone jangled peremptorily.

It was Gill.

"I say, Mr. Man, I want to see you, if I can. I had an air-mail letter from Josh yesterday; didn't find it here until this morning. It's about Father Francis. Do you suppose you could stand lunching with me two days in succession? I'm free this noon, and I thought . . . . er . . . ."

Bart had a vision of Alice, and the chill formality of the stone house on the Drive.

"I'm sorry, Gill," he began.

"There won't be anybody at the Club to-day; Sunday, you know. We could talk in peace and quiet there," Gill urged.

Bart again had visions, this time of John Oliver Pringle, Marcus Macaulay, and other eyeglassed, paunchy, gray, and bald-headed gentlemen

"I'm feeling rotten," he said, more definitely; "I've caught a beastly cold."

"But this is important. I've *got* to see you; we might as well make it for lunch."

Bart hesitated. He was as loath to go to the Stanislaus as to the house on Riverside Drive.

"No, Gill, I'm not up to it. But why don't you come here?" He remembered the crêpes suzettes and brightened. It would be pleasant to have old Gill at the studio for luncheon; he had never been there. Mildred was going out. Bart would "crack open" a bottle of Château Yquem—he had about three left in his wine closet—and Burns would serve the delectable lunch in front of the fireplace with just a burning log or two to add the proper cheery note. The idea caught him; his spirits rose.

At his urging, Gill agreed to come, promising to arrive a little before one, and Bart, with a new interest in the day, went to consult Burns and 'Stasia about the change in plan, get the precious bottle of Sauterne in order to have it chilled, and set out the ingredients for the cocktails.

When he reëntered the studio, Mildred, in a dressing gown, had come downstairs and was at the telephone.

"My dee-ar, that's quite all right," she was saying; "I understand perfectly. I've done it myself a score of times. I'll call the Ryans and say we can't come either; she'll probably be relieved. I confess I don't particularly relish going down on the train alone. Bart couldn't come anyway; he has a horrible cold."

She hung up in another minute, turned to face him to say the trip to Great Neck was off. Eunice's car was out of commission, and Eunice herself had just discovered she had another engagement.

"So I'll be round here to look after you, my dear," finished

Mildred brightly, "and share your crêpes suzettes, which I don't mind telling you I simply adore."

He stood still regarding her, his face darkening. All the prospect of the pleasant luncheon vanished. His annoyance mastered him.

"I'm sorry, my dear," he said slowly, heavily. "I've asked my brother Henry to lunch with me here to-day. I thought you weren't to be home."

She met his lowering look with a steady eye while she took in his meaning.

"Well," she said lightly, "will I crab the party?"

"I'm afraid so. Henry wants to talk to me about something confidential. He's had an air-mail letter from the Coast."

Her face sobered; she caught her under lip in her teeth.

"Very well," she said, when he finished, "I'll have 'Stasia bring me a tray upstairs."

But this did not particularly relieve the situation. The thought of Mildred eating resentfully from a tray in her room while he and his brother lunched merrily below in no way appealed to him. It would not be nearly so pleasant as if they had the entire studio to themselves. His expression revealed his thoughts.

"Do you want me to *get out?*" she demanded, her voice rising shrilly on the last two words. It nettled him.

"Frankly, I do," he said coldly.

She flushed, paled, squinting her bad eye; then her narrow breast rose on a deep breath, and she pinched her rouged lips together.

"Well—I *never!*" she exploded. For the first time since he had known her, his repugnance exceeded his fear of her.

When the hurricane broke, it was a wild torrent of reproaches, vulgar epithets, shrill abuse. She raged up and down the studio, her small fists clenched, thumbs tucked inside of her fingers—a way she had when angry. Waving her arms, beating her shut hands, she spouted forth a geyser of furious words. Unperturbed, he lit a cigarette, tossed it from him in disgust at the first sour taste, seated himself at his desk, and began turning the pages of his manuscript, trying not to hear her. His indifference whipped her fury to madness. There was a large turquoise-blue china lamp upon the escritoire at her elbow. With a sweep, she sent it crashing to the floor. His head came up with a jerk, he glared at her, his own fists doubling. Never before, not even years ago, when he discovered that Norah had tricked him, had he been conscious of a desire to lay hands upon a woman.

"Get out," he said tensely.

Her own violence frightened her. She stood looking down, wide-eyed, at the wreckage near her feet. Then she crumpled, falling into a chair, and burst into violent weeping, her thin body in its ridiculous dressing gown twisting and writhing in a paroxysm of sobbing. He watched her for some moments then reached for the telephone and called Gill's home.

"All right, feller," he said evenly, when he had his brother on the wire, "let's make it the Stanislaus. We can't eat here. I'll walk over through the Park and meet you at the Club about one."

Going to the coat closet, he donned his ulster, picked a cap off a hook, caught up gloves and stick, and went out of the studio without a glance at the heaving, blubbering woman in the chair.

Outside, in the hallway, while he waited for the elevator, he could still hear her.

CHAPTER III

§ I

"GUESS it's all up with the old boy. Josh says death is inevitable, and there's nothing to be done. He says . . . ."

Gill picked up the letter in his lap and readjusted his eyeglasses.

> " 'He may live three months; the chances are against his living six. He went to have his eyesight examined, and the oculist sent him to me; he'd found a black spot in his right eye, and it took me no time to confirm his suspicions. I put him in the hospital right away, but found his liver already enlarged. We call it 'melanotic sarcoma,' and it's about as malignant a form as we know. I don't think he's likely to suffer, but in any case, I'll keep him out of pain.' . . . ."

Gill's voice died to silence, and Bart studied the rain-streaked windowpanes.

"They've made him a monsignor, haven't they?"

"Yes, about three years ago. The Archbishop thinks a lot of him out there; everybody does."

"He was more like a father to me than an elder brother. He pulled me out of a bad mess."

"He's given to that sort of thing. Sylvia was crazy about him when she was out in San Francisco. Her letters were full of him. Must be a great soul."

"Where's he now?'

"In a hospital, I imagine. Josh says the Archbishop was for sending him down to one of the seminaries in the country, but Josh wants to have him where he can keep an eye on him for a while. He insists he's going to see to it the old boy doesn't suffer. . . . . Well, what do you think of his idea?"

The two brothers had again sought the deserted library of the Stanislaus. Rows of volumes filled the tall bookcases, newspapers and magazines were neatly arranged upon the broad mahogany tables. The room, despite its orderliness, smelled of stale smoke. Radiators in concealment clanked and gurgled, while the cold rain slashed the diamond-shaped windowpanes in long pencil lines.

The thin, kind smile and deep, melancholy, understanding eyes rose in Bart's memory.

"Josh says he'd like us both to come," Gill presently said in the silence, "but it's quite evident it's *you* he wants to see."

"I'll go," Bart said heavily. He was thinking of Mildred—had been thinking of nothing else but Mildred as he walked in the rain through the Park. Mildred, Mildred, always and eternally Mildred! But all this thinking had brought him nowhere. He was bound, bound by a will stronger than his own, bound by a tie more binding than any by which Peggy had held him. Sometimes, he had reflected as he slopped along in the rain, sometimes a heavy chest cold when exposed to wet weather brought on pneumonia, and sometimes pneumonia proved fatal; that would be as good a way of escape as any other. . . . . Nobody would really give a damn . . . . he was sick of the whole business . . . . sick of trying to write . . . . the children would get his money . . . . and Peggy . . . . well, Peggy'd be happy at last.

Gill was speaking:

". . . . Florida the end of the month or the first of next, but I guess California would do just as well, and it would be fun going out there with you. Only trouble is, California's a long ways off if anything should break in the Street."

He picked up Josh's letter, to run his eye through its several pages.

" 'He may live three months; the chances are against his living six.' Well, I could arrange things . . . .

"Only there's Sylvia!" Fresh doubt crept into his voice. "She's coming down for the week-end of the eighth and ninth. We'd planned on a party together."

"She'd understand," Bart said listlessly.

"Understand?" Gill took him up. "Why, say, Mr. Man, you don't know that girl! She'd understand *anything*. Why, she'd jump in the East River if I said the word! My goodness, Bart, that girl and I have a great relationship. I don't believe many fathers and daughters are as close as we are. We haven't a secret from each other; she knows all about me, and I guess I do about her. She drinks cocktails now and then when she's out with some of her friends, she smokes, and I wouldn't put a little mild petting past her for a moment. *She* tells me, makes no bones about it, and, by George, I'd far rather have her that way than doing things on the sly. Oh, Sylvia and I are the greatest pals, and I'm just as sure she'd give up anything I asked her to do as I am that I'm sitting here talking to you right this minute. My, my, Mr. Man, I wasn't thinking of her in connection with that week-end; I was thinking of *myself!* I just hate to miss it."

Bart was only partially following him. His own problem was on his mind. Mildred. He could no more go to California without her than to Nassau. He knew the row she'd make. She'd insist upon going along, particularly to California, fearing—he understood her mind—he might become reconciled to Peggy. She'd think he was lying if he told her the truth. Scenes, scenes, always scenes; ill-temper, reproaches, ugly jibes! He was sick of them, of her; yet he was afraid . . . . he *knew* he was afraid! She'd have her way as always, make him do as she wished.

What the devil *did* a man do when saddled with a—with a woman like Mildred?

He groaned audibly. Gill switched an eye upon him, a brow cocked.

"What's the matter? You look done-up."

"Cold, I suppose. I have it here." Bart tapped his chest.

"You've got something else wrong with you there besides a cold. What is it?"

Bart shook his head; he could not unburden himself.

"Oh, it's——" he began, then stopped. "You wouldn't understand, Gill."

"Perhaps I would. Is it about that . . . . er . . . . woman you're living with?"

Bart flushed; the phrase stung.

"Guess I know more about you than you think I do, Mr. Man," Gill said kindly. "Everybody knows—that is, within the family—why Peggy took the children West. We all felt it was a darn shame, but I guess you had your side of it."

"Yes," Bart repeated heavily. "I had my side of it . . . ." adding after a moment, "and you're right, it *was* a 'darn shame.' "

"You mean you—you got in too deep with this lady?"

"Something like that."

Gill considered, stroking his hollow cheeks.

"What puzzled me, and I guess puzzled the rest of 'em, was why you went back to her."

Bart shrugged.

"It was just one of those things," he said wearily, repeating the phrase he had used the previous afternoon.

"Is she with you now?"

Bart nodded.

"And you're sick of it?" Gill pursued.

Again Bart assented.

"Then why not come to California with me?"

"You don't understand"—impatiently.

"Well, come now, let me get this straight. I thought from what you just said you were anxious to end this affair."

"I am . . . . I think."

"Then what's the matter with coming West with me and telling her it's all over?"

Bart breathed a tired sigh. Words cost him a great effort.

"She'd want to come along," he said.

"Make a quiet get-away; she wouldn't know where you'd gone. A lawyer can handle the rest for you."

Bart shook his head.

"I can't," he admitted forlornly.

There was finality in his words, and Gill fell silent. The two men sat without speaking. Presently Gill heaved himself up from his deep chair and rang for a cigar; when the boy had brought it, he began slowly to pace the length of the large floor rug, puffing meditatively, the cigar in the center of his mouth.

Bart remained where he was, his forehead resting upon the palm of one hand, his elbow on his knee. He felt sick, sick from his cold, sick from his tortured spirit.

Gill stopped abruptly before him.

"I'd like to say a couple of things to you, Mr. Man, if you won't take offense," he said, balancing on his parted feet; "you're a very successful writer, you're in the public eye and all that, guess you understand a lot about human nature and how to make the folk you write about seem alive and regular. That may be so, but I can tell you something I suspect you don't know! I learned what I'm going to tell you bitter hard, and I learned it too late. It's this: there's nothing in this world worth striving for if you haven't somebody you care about to share it with!"

Dimly across the years came a voice—oh, long, long ago—somewhere—on a hot summer night, Frank Gardiner and Cam with fingers linked beneath a fold of Cam's skirt, Jack and Jane together, Josephine, Bart, and the fine, modulated voice was saying:

"We must live to serve, and in serving only is there life."

"Now, you just listen to me for a couple of minutes," Gill went on earnestly. "I can't express myself very well, but I think I can tell you something that will illustrate the point I want to make.

"Twenty-five years ago, Alice and I married. Since that time, she's gone her way, I've gone mine. I'm not blaming her, or anybody. But 'way back, during the first years of our marriage, we didn't have as easy a time making ends meet as people supposed. We both felt we oughtn't to have children. Guess I was more set against them at first than Alice was. Any rate, for a few years there were no baby complications, and then in 1911, Sylvia came along. Alice had an awful time; she was ill for nearly a year afterwards, and when she was all right again, she said she was through, swore she wouldn't have any more, and was mighty particular about seeing she was never caught that way again. Well, that's left us with just one child, our Sylvia, and say, when I think of what that girl's meant to me, and think you've got *five* like her, some of 'em sons, and they aren't with you or you with them——

"Now, now—hold your horses for just a minute more. Let me say this, and I'm done. I'm your brother, four years older, and I've had four years more experience, and if I can't tell you what's what, I'd like to know who can!

"I don't care what the whys and wherefores were of your bust-up with Peggy. That's neither here nor there. What I *do* care about and what I'm going to tell you straight from the shoulder is that you're a plain damn fool to pass up those kids of yours and miss all the fun of watching 'em grow up, and being *with* them, guiding, advising, enjoying them——"

"Ah, shut up!" Bart burst out, unable longer to contain himself. "You're a plain damn fool yourself. You don't know a *thing* you're talking about, and I've a good mind to punch your head, get out of your damn club, and never see hide nor hair of you again!"

"Hey, hey, hey!" Gill said hurriedly. "Calm down, Mr. Man; no offense intended. Sylvia, when she was out at the ranch, wrote me a lot of wonderful letters about your boys and girls. She was just crazy over them—especially the youngest one, the boy—and I just thought it was a damn shame you weren't getting as much kick out of 'em as I am out of my one-and-only."

"And so it is!" Bart cried angrily, shaking off his brother's placating hand; "so it is, a damn shame! But whose fault is it, I'd like to know? I went out there, didn't I? I told her I'd made a fool of myself; I begged her to take me back. She wouldn't see me! She wouldn't even *talk* to me! Don't you suppose I want my kids? Don't you suppose I miss 'em? Why, God damn your hide, Gill Carter, I've done for my children what you—with your nurses, governesses, and servants—never did for yours! I've taken care of 'em when they were sick, I've washed 'em and dressed 'em and diapered 'em! You never did things like that for your 'one-and-only.' *'Pass 'em up?'* Christ, what the hell 're you talking about?"

He fell back in his chair and caught his lips to still their agitated quivering. With an apologetic shrug, Gill turned away, made one or two turns of the rug, then came once more to stand before him.

"Let's go West together, Bart. Tell 'em you're done with this New York establishment, and see if Peggy can't be argued into reason. She can't very well prevent you seeing your children. They might be able to patch up things between you."

Bart thought of his son Dan coming into a room where he might be, with, "Say, Dad, I'd like to have you go up to Stanford with me, and have a look round"; or John asking his advice about Viticulture, or Janey and Margaret telling him of their latest marionette play, or Dick laying before him some problem of his own.

"You'll have to stand for my plain talk, Mr. Man," Gill continued, "but every time I'm with Sylvia or she writes me a letter or telephones down from Poughkeepsie, I can't help thinking of you and what you're missing."

Bart's head dropped into his hands.

"If I thought . . . . if I thought . . . ." he said huskily.

"It won't do any harm for you to go out with me and see how the land lies. I'm certain Father Francis will help you, and I can talk Jack round to being on our side. I can handle him all right; I always used to."

Bart looked up with light in his eyes and held his brother's gaze for an instant or two.

"By God," he said, rising and reaching out to grasp his hand, "I'll do it—I'll do it, if it's the last thing in my life! I'll do it, no matter *what* happens!"

"That's the stuff," Gill approved warmly; "that's the stuff. My, we'll have a corking time of it!"

At once they fell to discussing how soon they might leave; Bart could go at any time; the sooner he went, the more likely he'd be able to do so; Gill, however, would like to wait until after the week-end of the eighth.

"Let's say the tenth, then?" Bart proposed, and as they were shaking hands on the date, a club attendant appeared to say that Mr. Henry Carter was wanted on the telephone.

Gill departed and was back in a minute or two.

"They want me to come home right away, Bart. Something's gone wrong; Alice's smashed a cologne bottle or one of the servants' gotten drunk. But I'm going to start in right away planning for the tenth. That's a Monday, isn't it? We'll leave here Monday, and get there Thursday night. My, my, think how good it'll be to see the old town once more! The ferry tower and the Bay, the hills and the gulls, the taste and breath of good salt ocean fog! We ought to have a rip-roaring time, you and I. I haven't seen San Francisco since the earthquake! I left there early in '05! I won't know the old town. Say, look here, Mr. Man, I'm going to drag you along with me when I pull out of here on the tenth if I have to rope, throw, and tie you the way we did calves at Los Robles. Sylvia'll be delighted; she's mighty proud of her literary uncle. . . . ."

§ 2

The rain had changed to sleety snow as Bart recrossed the Park. With his heavy cold, it might have been wiser to have taken a taxi, he reflected, but again he wanted to think, and he thought best when tramping in bad weather.

He was holding an imaginary conversation with Mildred as he strode along.

"I owe Father Francis a great deal. He saved my life and my reason once; now he hasn't more than a few weeks to live—wants to see me. I'll show you Jack's letter to Gill, if you like. Truly, I'm not lying to you. I swear I'll be back in a month. No, it isn't the thing for you to come along, Mil. I'd enjoy it, of course—it would be great having you—but naturally, you ought to understand, Mil; the family'd think it was damn funny, and this is a family affair. They don't think any too kindly of you, Mil; you can hardly blame 'em, can you?

"An' then you want to remember this is no pleasure trip. My brother—he's the oldest and will be the first to go—is on his deathbed. I'd like to see him again, an' he wants to see me, says so particularly. Gill and I couldn't batch it together if you came along, Mil. . . . .

"Oh, you don't have to worry about Peggy. I shan't see her, even *talk* to her! Won't go near Los Robles. We'd only be in San Francisco a few days, and then Gill and I'd run down to Los Angeles to see how Cam and her husband're getting along."

When he found himself repeating his argument for about the sixth time, he smiled ruefully. So intent had he been on them that it was not until he had actually reached the studio building and was ascending in the lift that he remembered the tempestuous scene from which he had fled a few hours before.

Crossing the Park he had worked himself up by the reasonableness of his arguments to a state of resolution, but now, as it came fully upon him what he must face, his courage began to ebb, and it was with a wary, uncertain key, he turned back the lock in the paneled oak door and let himself into the studio.

He saw the big room was lighted, and lighted with the amount of dimness he liked. Logs burned in the fireplace, Mildred herself, in creamy lace, sat before it in a tall, straight-backed armchair, her chin cupped in one hand, two fingers denting her cheek. She turned as he came in.

"Bart?"

"Yes."

"Can you give me five or ten minutes?"

"Why, surely."

"Bart, I'm dreadfully ashamed of what happened this noon."

"Oh, that's all right."

"I've been thinking about us all afternoon."

"About us?"

"Yes. I've been wondering whether or not I ought to leave you."

"Oh, what the hell!" he said, frowning at the fire.

"I know you're tired of me, Bart. Oh, not entirely so," she hastened to say as his head came up. "Hear me out, please.

"I've given you all the devotion of which I'm capable; you're the only man I've ever really loved. I've been sitting here, thinking things out, and I've decided I'm done with pride, but I don't want to be done with life!

"I've been behaving like a hell-cat lately—and I'm going to change. It isn't fair to you to hold on to your coat tails. You're not responsible for the difficult position into which Peggy has forced me. I can see that; I see it clearly, now. I want you to be free, *really* free, to live your own life in your own way, and to have whom you like for friends without considering me."

Bart's mind leaped to the California trip, and he smiled at her pleasantly, patting her bare shoulder. She caught his hand and pressed it to her cheek, drawing him down toward her with the same movement. He yielded after a moment and sank to a knee beside her chair. She slipped an arm about his neck.

"Dearest," she said in her tenderest tone, "you're all I have. I haven't any use for life unless you share it with me. I flung at you in a rage yesterday about all I've sacrificed for you. I don't suppose you realize it, but I *have* given you everything. There's nothing left."

She paused and drew breath.

"Youth, my work, my independence, looks—if I ever had any! I'm old, now! I'm nearly fifty!"

The weariness in her voice touched him.

"Oh, come off! You're a damn attractive woman."

With a sad smile, she looked into his eyes.

"I've been behaving frightfully badly to you of late." She shook her head slowly.

"Oh, no," he reassured her; "you get a little upset sometimes. We all do."

"It's never going to happen again."

"That's fine, then." He patted her arm once more.

"I've an idea I hope is going to appeal to you. You've been talking about Spain lately. Let's go there, you and I. We'll get all the information and atmosphere you want for your next book, and we'll settle down for six months or so, and you can write it just the way you wish without giving a thought to editors or movie producers. I'll market it for you when it's done, and you won't be ashamed of what I do with it! I've heard of a villa in a little town called Ribadesella—that's up in Asturias in the northern part of Spain, on the shores of the Bay of Biscay. Eunice knows all about it. The Ryans had it once. It's an old monastery that some English people got hold of, oh, years ago, and remodeled; it's on the cliffs overlooking Biscay, and there're olive groves and vineyards and pigeons and mule bells. Sounds enchanting. We'll take 'Stasia with us, and you can leave Burns here to look after things, and we'll have a glorious holiday. And, oh, Bart, I won't bother you any more! I'll do some articles for *Crosby's* and *The Woman's Friend,* and we'll work and play and love each other again the way we used to!"

She drew his head to hers and slid her soft, smooth cheek against his lips. Bart found her fragrant with some delicate perfume. He kissed her, and she tightened her arm about his neck.

"Ah, you do love me—you do, you *do!*" she cried. "Say you do."

"Of course," he told her.

"We've had some wonderful times together, haven't we?"

"Yes, indeed."

"No man nor woman ever had a happier, more romantic time than we had in Sicily. Do you remember Taormina when the orange groves were in bloom?"

"Beautiful."

"And do you remember the red sails of the fishing boats coming home at sunset?"

"Very well."

"And do you remember some of our *funny* experiences? The time I tried to make *caneloni à la Florentine* from the recipe the chef at the Igiea gave me?"

He smiled at the recollection.

"And the night you made Luigi and Niccolo sing *Canta pe me* beneath my window, and I threw the slops out on them?"

His laugh was genuine.

"And do you remember drinking Lachryma Christi in the grape arbor, and the time Beppo drove us all the way to Girgenti, and the awful experience we had when we got stuck in the mud, and our two adorable donkeys, Rinaldo and Armida, and the sail in the *Vivace* to Trapani, and the marvelous fishing?"

"Yes, yes," he said, agreeing and nodding. They *had* had wonderful times together during those two years—and, ah, Mildred had been lovely then, companionable, amusing, tender, affectionate! What nights had been theirs with the moon silvering the whole world and the red of Etna's fires tingeing its canopy of smoke!

"That's just the way it's going to be at Ribadesella in our made-over monastery with the Cantabrian Mountains at our backs and Biscay at our feet."

She folded his face into her neck, and Bart, remembering, and responding to her affection and the subtle perfume delicately pervading her, drew her to him warmly. There stirred within him the old sensation of the current flowing, flowing, flowing.

Holding her from him for an instant, he looked deep into her eyes.

"You can be God-damned sweet when you want to be," he said with emotion.

"I'm always going to 'want to be' from now on. Oh, Bart,

Bart," she burst out, "how can you ever forgive me for being such an utter *fool!*" She covered her face.

"Forgive you for what?" He had forgotten.

"You're the most generous person in the world. I don't believe there's another man like you! . . . . Oh, for being such a devil—so—so ill-tempered!"

"Oh, that. Let's forget about that."

She caught him to her and kissed him with ardor.

"And you like my scheme of Spain and our monastery at Ribadesella?"

"Sounds great."

"You're wonderful! When do you want to start?"

He thought of his trip West and was calculating the date of his return when she said:

"How about in two weeks?"

"Two weeks!" he cried.

"Well, why not? You can take your work with you, can't you?"

"Oh, I guess so," he said, frowning. He realized for the first time she intended to put her plan into execution at once.

"You don't have to deliver your manuscript until May, and we can insure it and have it mailed from over there. We oughtn't to wait much longer than two weeks if we're going to take in Easter week at Seville; it would be simply crazy of us to go to Spain and miss that. We ought to get there by the end of March or first of April."

He rose from his kneeling posture and turned away. There came to him the recollection of the speeches he had made to himself crossing the Park.

God, he was an ass!

Where to find the courage now to tell her he wanted to go to California on the tenth! He couldn't do it, he couldn't do it!

"Damn!" he said under his breath.

Always the same problem—Mildred!

What did it matter? Mildred was like a cloying, clinging, languorous drug. She would blind his eyes, plug his ears, silence his heart.

"Bart, I've an awfully nice supper arranged for us. What time is it? Six? Dearest, I was in such a fright all afternoon! I was afraid you weren't coming back! Oh, indeed, I was, and, my dear, I haven't prayed since I was a little girl in the First Presbyterian Sunday School in Mansfield, but I prayed hard this afternoon. I begged God to send you back to me, and I promised if He did I'd do my best to be a *good girl!* And indeed I'm going to be!"

Once more she covered her face, and he saw a shudder convulse her shoulders. When she looked up, however, she was smiling.

"Let's have a cocktail. Is it too early? I'm dying for one. I tell you what I did. I telephoned George, and he sent one of his waiters over with a bottle of Bacardi, and then I persuaded 'Stasia to go to her brother's for some vodka, and we're going to have Chianti and chicken Piemontaise! And I made the salad myself, *fatiguée,* the way you like. If that doesn't sound nice to you, you're losing your appetite!"

"Mildred!"

"Well, how about a cocktail now? I'm fearfully exhausted from this afternoon. I worked myself into a blinding headache, and I'm doped with aspirin. Another five grains and a little rum will rout the last of it."

"All right," he agreed. "I'm thirsty, too; I smoked too many cigars. I always do when I lunch with Gill."

"Will you make them? Or shall I?"

"Let Burns do it. He does them all right."

She rang and gave the order. When the man had gone, she came to Bart and put her thin arms about his neck, looked into his eyes, then laid her head in a tired way against his breast, breathing a little sigh.

"It's so good having you loving me again," she said simply.

He kissed her hair. She felt slight in his embrace and smelled sweet.

"Do you like my idea of Castille and Granada?"

"Very much."

"And will you enjoy Easter in Seville, with the crowds and the bullfights and all?"

"You know it."

"And summer in our monastery overlooking the Bay of Biscay?"

He kissed her soft golden hair once more.

"Then tell me . . . ." She drew away, a hand upon either shoulder. "The *Conte Verdi* sails on the twentieth, or we can take the *Olympic* or the *Bremen* about the same time, and go down from Paris. I thought you might like to go by Naples and motor over through Monte Carlo, along the Riviera, over the Pyrenees, that way. Easter's about the middle of April, so we really have plenty of time."

"Well, why all the rush?"

"But why wait? It's just the season over there now, and the Riviera is at its gayest this month."

He passed a troubled hand over his eyes. She clung to him.

"Let's not wait, dearest; let's go now. I'm ready to sail with you to the ends of the earth! I'll sail next Saturday, if you like. Burns can take charge of everything here. Oh, Bart, Bart, let's not wait. Let's do it while we're in the mood. Life's so short! Youth will be gone to-morrow! And while we're young and still love each other!"

She raised her lips to his, and he kissed her tenderly.

The telephone bell whirred.

Both started, but he kissed her again before answering it. There was a confused humming as he placed the receiver to his ear. It was as if someone were breathing heavily at the other end of the line.

"Hello, hello," he said.

"Bart," said a man's voice, "this is Gill speaking." A pause . . . . more confused humming.

"Yes, Gill, speak a little louder please. I can't hear . . . ."

"Bart," repeated the voice, "this is Henry, this is Gill."

"Yes, Gill, what is it?"

"Bart, can you come to me right away? I'm taking the next train for Poughkeepsie . . . ."

Bart strained to listen.

"Go on, Gill," he encouraged tensely. "What's wrong? What's happened?"

"Syl . . . .

"Sylvia was killed this afternoon in a motor accident."

CHAPTER IV

§ 1

A THICK gray winter fog lay over San Francisco. Bart, looking out from his hotel windows, could discern the shadowy shapes of tall, unfamiliar office buildings looming bulkily through the mist.

It had been a mistake, he decided, not to let Josh know the exact time of his arrival the night before. His brother would have met him, despite the hour, would have invited him to his home, they would have talked, and Bart would have ascertained to what hospital Father Francis had been taken. Now he must wait until Josh came to his office, which would be—so the attendant nurse had told him when he telephoned—not until the afternoon; the doctor operated in the mornings and visited his patients. Bart hesitated at calling up Louise, or the Priests' House at the rear of the Cathedral, where he knew Father Francis had resided. It would be wiser to see Josh first.

The death of Sylvia had made a profound impression upon Bart. Gill's grief was tragic. Bart had been with him during the terrible hours at Poughkeepsie, had arranged to have the young girl's body sent to New York, had interviewed the undertaker, completed the funeral arrangements, and had accompanied Gill and Alice to the cemetery. There he had stood bareheaded as the flower-laden casket was lowered into the ground, while his brother sobbed brokenly, and Alice, shrouded in black veiling, wept in the arms of a friend. The awful return to the cold, desolated house had followed, and the hopeless attempt to console a grief-stricken man whose life at one blow had been cleaned of interest. For several days he had not dared to leave Gill's side, knowing he contemplated suicide. It was his wife's need that steadied him; grief broke her, and the pity of it woke him to make an effort. Their sorrow drew them together as nothing had done since the first years of their marriage.

On a late Friday night, eight days after the funeral and five prior to Bart's arrival in San Francisco, he had seen them, clinging to each other for the only comfort life held for either, on board the *Ile de France,* bound for Europe.

Bart had promised to take the trip to California alone, carrying to their dying eldest brother, Gill's message of farewell.

The experience had brought him sharply face to face with his own situation; it gave a lash to the words Gill had said to him in the Stanislaus Club:

"You aren't getting as much kick out of 'em as I am out of my one-and-only."

He was haunted by the faces of his children. His sons and daughters! He could think of nothing else, realizing his life without them was as empty as Gill's and Alice's.

During the week following the funeral, he had seen little of Mildred. He had remained three or four nights at his brother's house, and on other occasions had come and gone in the studio too late or too early to do more than casually encounter her. The tragedy had served as an excuse for absenting himself, and during this interval he had had a chance to think. Slowly and definitely he made up his mind that he and Mildred had reached the parting of the ways. Cruel perhaps it was, but he could see no alternative. He did not want to go to Spain with her, he did not want to go on living with her, he did not want *her* any more; he was sick of both blandishments and fault finding. He wanted to be free, free to go back to his wife!

Before Gill sailed, he discussed the situation with him, and his brother, warmly approving, sent him to his lawyer. Mr. Grim assured him he would smooth out everything for him; he had only to go to California and leave his affairs in Mr. Grim's hands.

Acting on this attorney's advice, the night the *Ile de France* sailed, Bart, instead of returning to the studio, stayed at a downtown hotel, telephoned Burns in the morning, and, knowing he could trust the man, told him to meet him at the Grand Central Station at a certain hour with two suitcases of clothing, a few essentials, and his unfinished manuscript. At train time, he gave Burns a letter for Mildred which he had spent the morning writing and rewriting. In it, he told her simply and frankly he felt they had outlived their attraction for one another, and he would be glad if she would consider their relationship at an end. She was to be well provided for—he gave her Mr. Grim's address—and he wished her the best of luck and every happiness. At her convenience he would like her to vacate the studio, take what belonged to her and anything else she desired; the balance of the furnishings Mr. Grim would then send to storage, and offer the apartment for sublease.

To write the letter had been a most disagreeable task, but he had shut his mind to memories, keeping his thoughts on Peggy and the children, and as the Overland bore him thundering across the plains, and he had days and nights of travel alone in his compartment to think of what was past and what awaited him, he was satisfied he had done right. No matter what Peggy decreed, at least he was finished with Mildred. She could no longer complicate or poison his life. He was approaching his wife free of all entanglements.

§ 2

He roamed San Francisco until the hour he could present himself at Josh's office. Walking the streets he had once known and loved so well stirred him. There was left no scar of the conflagration which had laid the city in ashes twenty-four years before. The Call Building, in and out of which he had ranged as a reporter, now seemed shabby, dingy, insignificant by contrast with the new towering skyscrapers. On Taylor Street he was unable to decide exactly what had been the site of the old "Abbey"; Union Square was hemmed in with soaring walls of masonry.

Ambling along a street, his eye fell upon a soiled and torn billposter which caught and held his attention. A tattered, flapping corner he was obliged to raise with the tip of his cane before he could read it all: An announcement of an evening lecture to be given in Scottish Rites Hall on BIRTH CONTROL; the lecturer was Doctor Josephine Crane Carter, M. D., Ph. D.; the date more than a fortnight past.

Bart studied it, then slowly continued on his way, his thoughts concerned with his sister-in-law, her mania for causes, for intellectualism, and in particular with the phases of this Cause of Causes to which she seemed to have devoted her life—Birth Control.

§ 3

Toward four o'clock he entered Josh's office in the Fitzhugh Building. A nurse ushered him into a small private waiting room, and it was there, a quarter of an hour later, the doctor came to him.

Bart had not expected to find Josh looking so elderly. He was more like Gill now. His face was deeply furrowed, dark, immobile, concerned; bifocals neatly fitted the sunken sockets of his eyes; his mustache was close-clipped, square; it and his short-cropped hair were distinctly gray. A man of strength and decision.

"Well!" He caught Bart's hand with his right, adding his left. Pleasure spoke from his eyes. "Here you are."

The two brothers measured each other.

"I dropped in to-day for just a minute; you're busy. What time shall I come back?" Bart felt that even this brief interruption was an imposition on the physician's time. Josh ignored the question; he concentrated a look on this younger brother whom he had not seen for ten years.

"You got in . . . . ?"

"Yesterday—last evening, seven-fifty."

"Who met you?"

"Nobody. I did not want to trouble you."

"Why didn't you come right out to the house? We've been expecting you."

"I didn't know; 'fraid of disturbing you. Louise?"

"Oh, fine, but she'll be hurt you didn't come out."

"I'm sorry. I was tired and dirty, and I thought a hotel would be the best place for me. Where is he? I thought I might go to see him this afternoon and then come back when you're ready for me."

"Who?"

"Father Francis."

"He's at Los Robles. He wanted to go."

"How is he?"

Josh lifted a shoulder, spread out his hands.

"So-so."

"Pain?"

"None to speak of. Getting weaker, of course."

"How long now?"

"Month or two. How did you leave Gill? All broken up, eh?"

"Yes, badly. I persuaded him to go abroad with his wife. They sailed last Friday. It was a terrible experience, Josh, the worst I ever lived through. I was afraid Gill would end it."

The doctor shook a frowning head.

"Let me know what time to come back, Josh; I know you're busy. I came in only to find out where Father Francis was."

"Well, he's not here, but you go straight out to the house," Josh interrupted in his crisp, authoritative way. "Where you staying?"

"St. Francis."

"Check out, take your bags and a taxi. I'll telephone Louise to expect you. I'll be there about seven or eight, never can tell when I'll be through down here. We dine usually at eight, but I'll see that one of my associates takes any emergency calls to-night, so we won't be disturbed.

"We've been expecting you for the past two days!" he broke off to say impatiently, as Bart hesitated. "Your room's fixed, everything's waiting; we've been counting on you!"

§ 4

It was close to eight o'clock when Josh finally reached his home that evening.

Bart had done as he directed. Louise had been warm in her greeting, and he felt he was really welcome. Even more than her husband, she seemed to have aged, with a trace of uncertainty in voice and gesture. She kissed him warmly when, glimpsing his taxi from an upstairs window, she ran to open the front door and found him waiting on the stoop.

"You haven't changed as much as I feared," she said, holding him by both hands. "Oh, I don't know what I expected since you've become famous; something fierce and awesome! You're a bit heavier, perhaps, but you're the same old Bart! Oh, I'm glad, glad you've come back to us."

The same guest room, in which he had lain ill for so many weeks, he found in readiness for him again. He bathed, dressed, and came down a little before seven to find his sister-in-law in the library. While they waited for Josh to arrive from the office, Louise told him the family news.

Porter and Gertrude Farnsworth were both dead, as were likewise all their children. Charley, Felix, Ada, and at last Dora, one after another, had found their way to tubercular graves. Dora had married, brought a tubercular baby into the world, and died in childbirth.

Trudie McGillicuddy was living with one of her sons—Jerry, Louise believed it was—who was in the cement business in Merced; Leo, the twin brother, had married and gone East. Trudie was running a rooming house for some of the cement workers.

"Why, what happened to Jerome, her husband?" Bart wanted to know; "Josh said something about him in his letter to Gill; what was the matter?"

Louise looked troubled.

"He's very ill, I'm afraid. The Doctor will tell you."

Bart expressed sympathy, then presently asked if she and Josh had attended Josephine's lecture. They had both done so, she told him, and was about to add some comment, when her husband came in. While he was upstairs, getting ready for dinner, Louise reverted to the subject.

"Josephine's heart and soul are in this crusade, Bart, and, of course, it's merely a question of time before she stirs up enough public interest to have our federal and state statutes repealed. The Doctor was most impressed by her. She makes an excellent talk. We waited for her after the lecture and met two other women who were with her—one the lady with whom she was staying, and the other, a sort of secretary or traveling companion. We brought them all back here to the house for some coffee and sandwiches. We had a wonderful discussion; both of us liked Josephine enormously. She told us how you had befriended her in New York last April. Must have been a humiliating experience for her! She has a great admiration and sympathy for you."

Louise implied something more and Bart was about to ask what it was, when Josh came down, and they went in to dinner.

§ 5

An hour later, he found himself comfortably established with a cigar in the doctor's study, facing his brother, who sat ensconced at his desk, a glass-shaded desk light throwing a faint greenish radiance upon his strong face.

During dinner the priest's condition had been discussed, and Josh had spoken with feeling of the fine courage their brother had shown when, after consulting the Archbishop, it had been decided to tell him he had only a short time to live. He had but two wishes: one was to die at Los Robles, associated with the happy days of his boyhood; and the other to see his brothers and sisters once more. Especially, he had been anxious for Bart, who now asked for further details.

"There was no reason against his going to Los Robles," the Doctor told him. "He hadn't begun to show the effects of his disease then, Jack and Jane were eager to have him, and I felt he would be as well off there as anywhere. I took him down in the car. His appetite, however, is beginning to fail now. He doesn't want to eat, can't eat, and doesn't sleep any too well, but he isn't sick enough for a nurse, and Jane and Peggy look after him. Medcraft sees him every night——"

"Medcraft!" Bart interrupted.

"The old man's son—a doctor, too. He telephoned me from Guadalupe yesterday. The veronal isn't effective any more, and I told him to give the old boy a hypo at night. There's no excuse for his suffering. A month or two more. He'll be very happy to know you're here."

Since the afternoon hour in the physician's office, when he had learned that Father Francis had gone to Los Robles, Bart realized if he had to go there to see him, he must come face to face with Peggy. The thought recurred to him at this moment, and as the imminence of the encounter suddenly came to him, he felt his heart give a quick heave. How would she receive him? What would she have to say? Josh, following his mind, said:

"You must know the old boy wants, above everything else, to reconcile you and Peggy."

Bart ran a nervous hand across his mouth.

"Any obstacles in the way?" Josh asked.

"Peggy," Bart replied simply.

"I don't mean Peggy," the doctor said; "I mean your present—the liaison you have in New York?"

"That's over."

"You're sure?"

"Positive."

"I'm glad. It will make a difference. The old boy—I always think and speak of him affectionately that way—is very much concerned about you. He's a great soul, Bart; you'll get what I mean when you see him. He comes as close to being a saint as anybody I know, and he's a very practical one, if you understand me. He's human; he makes allowances for human weaknesses. A man like that does a tremendous lot of good in this world."

"I suppose so," Bart agreed.

"I don't believe he'll have any regrets about going after he sees you, and has brought you and Peggy together. He's been praying for your soul the last ten years. It's only recently, I think in the past year or so, he's learned you weren't entirely to blame, or at least there were extenuating circumstances."

"I don't understand." Bart was puzzled.

"Well . . . ." It was Josh's turn to stroke his lips. "He and I are very close, y'u understand. We've been here in San Francisco together for twenty years, and we've seen each other—oh, almost regularly two or three times a week. 'Bout a year or so ago, Peggy came up to see me about some trouble she imagined she had. There was nothing to it, but while I was examining her, I asked about her relations with you; she told me the fear of more children had always been a problem to you, and I asked her if she had ever used contraceptives; at that she flared up at me and told me that recourse to them was strictly banned by the Church, and that she considered employing them a crime against Nature and a sin against God. I didn't argue the matter with her, but, with poor Jerry McGillicuddy in mind, I asked her what she did, and she told me quite unaffectedly she had banished you to another room——"

"What about McGillicuddy?" Bart interrupted.

"Oh, he ran into the same situation. Trudie, you know, has one of those deeply religious natures. She was much like Eva

Ann—and I'll tell you about *her* in a minute!—and she wouldn't let Mac come near her. I don't know whether it was from fear of conceiving again or whether, after the twins were born, the idea of having another child was repugnant to her, or whether she just couldn't tolerate Mac. Poor chap! He didn't call me until it was too late. He lived in a kind of hell for years. No question but what he loved Trudie, wanted her and nobody else. Now he has one of the worst cases of neurasthenia that's ever come to my notice. I'll take you over to the Diablo Sanitarium to see him one of these days. I've done all I can for him, but he's in a pitiable condition, and of course, what he fears is insanity, and I haven't much doubt that's the way he'll go.

"To get back to your case: I gave a hint of what Peggy told me to Father Francis, and he had the same thing out of her in two minutes the next time he saw her. He wanted to know why she hadn't mentioned the facts to him before, and she said she'd never thought of it. Then he went after her pretty hard, I imagine, told her, what I was sure he *would* tell her, that in the eyes of the Church she had done you a great wrong, that a wife has no right to refuse herself to her husband, provided, of course, there is no serious reason for the refusal. It's a definite breach of contract.

"What disturbed the old boy was that none of us understood this when you followed Peggy out here, or again two years later when you wrote.

"Anyway," Josh continued, fitting the tips of his fingers together and tilting backward in his chair, "I've done considerable thinking since then, and a great deal of it along this subject of birth control. Of course, his Reverence doesn't agree with me in one iota. He believes it profanes the sacrament of wedded life, countenances sex indulgence, is a frustration of God's design in nature. That's the Church's view, and we can hardly expect him to take any other; he's all for continence, and argues that continence has been successfully practised for long periods, even years, by thousands of individuals like himself; he instances army and navy men long separated from their wives, travelers, men married to invalids, the widowed——"

"Bah!" Bart exploded. "People who argue like that haven't lived or aren't living in close proximity with a woman they love, sharing the same room with her, touching her, sometimes even going so far, if the man happens to love her, as to kiss her! Continence be damned! And in my case—Peggy's and mine—it would have had to be continence for five, ten, fifteen years, because, so help me God, Josh, there was never a time in the month when Peggy was safe. It always meant a child."

"Many women are like that."

"Oh, well . . . ." Bart began disgustedly. He paused a moment, then continued, "I know I would never have become interested in another woman if Peggy had listened to reason and followed the advice of our family physician in Port Washington."

He shook his head forlornly.

"What do you propose to do now?" Josh asked.

"Make it up with her, if she'll let me. I've never stopped loving her, Josh, never for a minute. Hell, Josh, I don't defend myself; I'm just a damn fool. Mildred offered me something Peggy refused, and I was just weak enough to fall for it. That's all there is to it—and I guess it's a great deal too much. But there it is. I've finished with Mildred, I'm never going to see her again, don't want to see her, hate the sight and thought of her; now, I want my wife and my children, and I'm ready to give everything I possess to get 'em back. I haven't any *rights* in the matter, I know. But if Peggy will take me . . . ."

"I think she will. She's not as hard as she was. Father Francis has been talking to her, and he's made Jane see it was her duty not to prejudice Peggy against you, and, I confess, I've been doing a little judicious urging on the side."

"Thanks," Bart briefly commented.

"There're a lot of angles to this birth-control business, and I try not to lay too much emphasis on the medical one, which is perhaps the one I see clearest. Josephine, of course, is concerned only with the sociological phase and the woman's standpoint, and she, with those associated in this movement, should be allowed to have their way. Jo's fighting for the establishment of health clinics in all parts of the country and for the repeal of five federal statutes and various state laws which class the giving out of contraceptive information along with obscenity——"

"Outrageous legislation," Bart broke in. "We're the only country in the world that has any such laws."

"No, France has a law, enacted in 1920 just after the war, whose purpose is, I understand, to suppress any birth-control propaganda, and Canada, in 1927, passed legislation very similar to our own."

"But no other civilized, enlightened nation?"

"I believe not; but I fancy there are very few French women —rich or poor—who do not know everything there *is* to know about birth control.

"Josephine claims that reckless breeding should be checked for the sake of those who are here. It unquestionably takes the lives of thousands of women annually, ruins the health of as many more, and in addition brings hundreds of thousands of diseased or crippled children into the world who never should have been born. There can be no doubt that she is right.

"Three women you and I know are—or were—examples of such reckless breeding. You may recall, Bart, that your first wife had a sister, a half-witted, degenerate nymphomaniac, named Ossip?"

"Very well."

"Her history came to my attention the other day in a state medical report. She's confined now in a home for women of her type, but before she was put where she couldn't do any further harm she had brought twenty-four diseased and insane children into the world. Half of them died, many are now living in institutions, and the rest are at large, doubtless breeding and bringing more diseased or insane children into the world. Here in California we are sufficiently progressive to sterilize such people, but the harm was done before this woman ever reached the attention of authorities. Such a creature never wanted children; she was a half-witted, ignorant animal, and she would gratefully have used birth control if somebody had told her about it.

"Another woman, a relative of us both, would have saved herself and her family, if she'd been instructed and permitted to use contraceptives."

"Aunt Lizzie Carter," Bart nodded. "Peggy and I used frequently to speak of her as the 'horrible example.' We didn't want ourselves or our children to go her way."

"Too many babies and having them too fast killed Aunt Lizzie. After she had borne six, she needed a long rest."

"It ruined Uncle Stephen."

"Ruined the whole family," the Doctor amended.

"What became of them all?"

"Drifted away. I don't know. Lottie was mixed up in some unsavory scandal in Salinas. May, I understand, gravitated to Monterey and became one of the town's 'tarts.' Jim was involved in a murder scrape and escaped conviction by the skin of his teeth. I don't remember the exact circumstances. The rest vanished. They were a weak, rotten lot, but if they had been brought up *differently,* they might have turned out differently.

"The saddest case of all comes closer to us than either of these. It's our own sister, Eva Ann. Last fall, she was arrested for bootlegging and clapped into jail!"

"Eva Ann! *Bootlegging!*"

"Miserable case. The *Examiner* here played it up in headlines. I took a hand then; Father Francis did the rest.

"Tony Rodoni turned out to be just what any one of us might have predicted. He had a milk route in San José, and Eva Ann bore him one child after another. They lived in wretched poverty, almost destitution. Nothing seemed to bother Tony; he was a hale, husky wop who liked his *vino,* his ease, and his married privileges. After Eva Ann had borne him six or seven children, he grew tired of her, philandered a bit, disappeared at intervals, came home long enough to put her in the family way, disappeared again, and kept that up until Eva Ann had *twelve* children! The last one, I believe, died, and she has become a sunken, sodden kind of woman without spirit or mentality. It's a terrible pity when you stop to think what a lovely child she was. She never refused Tony; she loved him, and he could have her whenever he chose. The Church backed him up. Heaven knows how she lived during all those years.

"The older children married and scattered. Tony vamosed; no one's heard anything of him for years. Eva Ann was left with five of the younger kids—two boys, twenty-three and twenty-four, another son, Joe, about seventeen, a girl of thirteen, and one of twelve. The two grown sons turned to bootlegging, made their own beer, trafficked in wine procured from the vineyardists in the county, and did a thriving business. They operated a sort of beer-and-wine garden on the highway a few miles out of town. The family knew prosperity for the first time in its history. Eva Ann enjoyed the only comfort she had known since marriage. But it was inevitable they should get into trouble. The federal agents raided the place. The boys skipped; Eva Ann and the two younger children were hauled off to jail; in the arrest, Joe, in some way, was accidentally shot and killed. It was claimed he was an innocent victim. There was a hullabaloo in the newspapers. Father Francis and I went down. We got Eva Ann out of jail, paid the fine, had the case against her and her sons dismissed, located a married daughter in Stockton, and she's living with her now. Father Francis put the two girls into a Catholic home somewhere in the country.

"Birth control undoubtedly would have been a blessing to Eva Ann. The priest and I had a battle royal over the matter, but, of course, you can't make him admit a thing——"

"Is there anything *I* could do for Eva Ann? I mean, to make her more comfortable?" Bart asked.

"N-ooo," Josh drawled; "she's being taken care of all right. You wouldn't know her, though; she's been beaten mentally, physically, spiritually. Tony was a happy-go-lucky, irresponsible chap who crushed her body and soul. Her daughter, with whom she's living at present, is the only one who seems to have any character. She wouldn't accept help, is anxious to look after her mother, and Father Francis gives me a fair report of the situation. And that's *that.*"

"G-god!" Bart ejaculated.

"All of us Carters present interesting phases of this birth-control problem. Take Camilla and Frank Gardiner, for instance. There was no reason why they shouldn't have married long before they did. It was the fear of having children which kept them apart. When they finally were free to marry, Camilla—who of all women should have had a fine, healthy progeny—was too old. She and Frank came up from Los

Angeles to see me. They wanted to know why they couldn't have any children. It wasn't pleasant to have to tell them the reason.

"Now, take Tilly. You remember what a silly, simpering sort of a fool she was. She married her Swiss gentleman, and childbearing normalized her. She's a fine woman, a devoted wife and mother, and has three lovely children. I don't think she had many religious qualms about birth control. She let her husband dictate to her about that, as he did in most everything else. Their children are all fine, husky youngsters, spaced two or three years apart, and I fancy there won't be any more. . . . . Gill lost his only one, eh?"

"Yes," said Bart, "and he's terribly sorry, now, that he and Alice didn't have more. There's no one to replace Sylvia, nor a remaining child to console them. Alice refused to have another baby after her confinement—afraid, I suspect, or too selfish. Now, she regrets it as much as Gill does. It would be mighty different for them to-day if she had."

Josh drummed on the edge of the desk.

"There," said he, "you have another aspect of the situation. Both Gill and Jack with their wives are cases in point where the practice of birth control is death not only to their own happiness but a menace to the welfare of our country at large. Jane didn't want any children at first, she wished to feel 'secure,' to pay off the mortgages on the ranch before she involved herself and her husband in the burden of raising a family. I know for a fact she started using contraceptives right away. Well-l, it is a moot question among physicians whether the persistent use of contraceptives during the early years of married life when a woman is ripe for pregnancy doesn't sterilize the woman. Many physicians think so. I'm not prepared to say, but I'm a long way from saying it *isn't* so. It's something you cannot prove. The reproduction organs in a woman are put there by God or Nature for a special purpose, and if they aren't used, they *may* dry up the way any other powers or potentialities of the body will wither if not employed. If the pollen on a flower could be neutralized time after time, it isn't illogical to suppose the flower will cease to reproduce.

"The fact remains, Jane probably won't have any children, and she and Jack feel badly about the matter now. I suspect that when your family came out from the East to live, they began to realize what children of their own would mean to them. They came to see me, and I had to tell them what I had told Camilla. Jane's past forty-seven. She'll never be a mother now, and it's sad to see how much she and Jack would like a baby.

"They should have thought of that twenty-five or thirty years ago. When young people marry, and there's no physical reason against it, they should go right ahead, I believe, and have a child, and keep on having more children without too much calculating. So many young couples feel they can't afford a baby. They're too selfish, that's what's the matter with them, and they ought to be forced to have a child—three or four.

"I have a patient, a young woman, who married five years ago. I urged her to have a baby at once. She said she and George couldn't afford one; he was earning about seventy-five dollars a week, quite enough, in my opinion, to start raising a family. But, oh, no, they wouldn't listen. They wouldn't give up the car; they wouldn't move into a less expensive apartment. Two years later, George's father met with an accident, and George suddenly found himself with his father and mother on his hands; the old man hadn't a cent, had saved nothing. The car promptly went, they moved out of their expensive apartment into one at half the rent, and George went to work with a determination that he *had* to earn more money. He had three people on his hands to support instead of one. What happened? Reaching down, as he did, to a stratum of energy he didn't know he possessed, his new absorption in his job soon drew the firm's attention, and by the end of the year they gave him a raise, raised him again last year, and now they threaten to take him into the business. My point is this: If George and his wife had not interfered with Nature, and responsibilities in the shape of a couple of children had come to them, he would and could have done exactly what he had to do when his parents became dependent upon him. The accident to his father developed him; children would have done the same. The more responsibilities a man assumes, Bart, the more likely he is to rise up and meet them. And believe me, bringing children—good, strong, healthy brats—into the world is the most precious responsibility we have in this life.

"Jack and Gill, with their respective wives, have made their own beds, and now they have to lie in them. I confess I have not much sympathy for either.

"But, before I criticize further, I feel I ought to explain about myself and Louise. Few people know this, Bart, but Louise is an epileptic, and epilepsy is hereditary. She is much better now, rarely has an attack, but both she and I knew it would be impossible for us to have children. Our problem would have been a serious one without the boon of birth control. . . . . Take the Farnsworths. My God, what criminality was theirs: bringing four children into the world with a heritage of misery, suffering, and death. They should never have married—Uncle Porter shouldn't, at any rate, with those weak lungs of his—but having married, birth control was the only solution for them. I can't conceive of happy marriage between a loving man and woman without sex contact, despite all his Reverence has to say.

"There is one more thing I'd like to bring up about this question, and I'm done. It requires approximately four births per couple to sustain our present population without increase; the average number of children born of college parents is 2.8, while those of men and women listed in *Who's Who* is 2.9. You can clearly see where birth control is being practiced. Our colleges and universities are destroying the material on which they feed; they are little better than engines for the suicide of the human race; they are sterilizing our scholars just as did the monasteries and nunneries of the Middle Ages.

"It is a fallacy to suppose that our intellectual class can be replenished from those below it. The exact opposite is the case. In order to save the upper classes from bringing about their own destruction, not only must they multiply, but the fecundity of the lower classes must be curtailed. It must be obvious to anyone who stops to consider the situation at all that our intellectual class is dying out, and our non-college type of citizen and less mentally fit are on the increase; it must necessarily follow that our standard of national intelligence will decline and continue to decline.

"Even more interesting is the fact that the birth rate of the entire country is on the wane. You don't think so? Well, I happen to have figures right here, and they are straight from Washington."

Sorting some papers in a wicker basket on his desk, the physician drew out a small sheaf clipped together.

"In 1920 the birth rate per 100,000 population was 23.7; in 1927 it had dropped to 20.7; in 1928 to 19.7. What have you to say to that? However, race suicide is not determined solely by the falling birth rate but by the ratio of the birth rate to the death rate, and our death rate shows a slight decrease.

"The crux of the whole situation is simply this: our intelligent classes are not reproducing themselves, and our ignorant, inferior ones are. Unless birth control is stopped among the upper classes, and its use legalized among the lower classes, the best part of our population will die off, and the country will be overrun by incompetents and morons."

CHAPTER V

§ I

From Guadalupe to Carterville, the road stretched in a broad, straight ribbon of cement, bordered at one side by trolley tracks along which ponderous, leviathan steel cars thundered at intervals, plunging across the flat valley floor. Fences, wire and picket, edged the naked orchards whose black furrowed soil was set with orderly rows of leafless trees; cottages, cabins, houses attractive and ugly, stood back a hundred paces or so from the highway. The air was heavy with blooming acacia, while here and there an occasional orange tree displayed its half-hidden golden fruit, and peach, cherry and flowering quince flaunted banners of pink and white, oriflammes of spring.

"It's beautiful!" Bart involuntarily exclaimed.

"Nothing like California in February," Louise, from the back seat of the car, leaned forward to say.

"It's a gracious country," Josh commented.

He swung the limousine around a curve, and the clean, bare road, cement white, lay straight ahead in an undeviating line.

"I'd never recognize it," Bart said. "It's like visiting a foreign country for the first time. I used to know every stick and stone round here when I was a boy."

"Our folks were pioneering," Josh remarked. "The old Captain and his kind opened up this part of the world for the little 'fellers' who now are living contentedly on five or ten acres, and getting more out of life, I believe, than in any other part of the world."

"It's all changed," Bart said sadly.

"Changed for the better."

"I am not so sure."

"Oh, certainly, where so many people are getting so much happiness."

" 'Where every prospect pleases, and only man is vile'," Bart quoted.

The Doctor laughed indulgently.

"You remember it as a boy—the empty reaches, the roaming cattle herds, the scattered settlers—and you resent this influx of new people who do not share your memories."

"I suppose so."

"How long's it been since you were here?"

"Nineteen ten."

"Humph!"

"It used to take us the better part of three hours to jog this distance from Guadalupe."

"I fancy our respected father frequently made it in less."

*"You'*ll do it in half an hour!"

"The roads are all good. What time did we leave the house this morning, Lou?" he asked his wife.

"Just quarter after ten."

"Not so bad," Josh remarked to Bart; "five hours, with time out for lunch."

"Heavens," Bart exclaimed fervently, "how all this takes me back!"

"I left in 1896. That's a long time ago," mused the physician.

"Say," Bart broke out, "that's the old Frenchman's shack, and there's Nick Petersen's windmill! The rickety thing's still standing! I remember what an ungodly noise its sweeps used to make at night when I was coming home late from 'Lupe."

"Hah! I haven't heard the town called that since I was in my 'teens."

"Pudgie used to speak of it so," thought Bart, but he did not mention it.

The car sped swiftly, swirling around slower vehicles, flashing past approaching ones. A trolley roared down upon them and was gone, while trundling motor busses, like huge beetles, monopolized the right of way. Warm air rushed fragrantly in at the car's windows, orchards basked in beguiling sunshine, fleckless heavens shone a blue of blueness, and the perfume of acacia scented the world.

Around a curve and across a stone bridge, the car entered a strange town with stone and brick buildings, a public square.

"What——" Bart began, in amazement.

"Carterville!" Josh announced, amused by his bewilderment.

Bart glanced through one, then the other window.

"I can't believe it!" he cried.

"'S fact. There're three to four thousand people here now. It's bigger, some claim, than Guadalupe. Take my word for it, Carterville is very much on the map, but, of course, it's the Japs . . . ."

Even before he mentioned them, Bart was aware of the preponderance of the Orientals—swart, stocky figures, clad in shabby overalls and battered hats, ambling in and out of the stores, congregating in groups, hurrying along the pavements, intent upon their own enterprises. The automobiles, moving in slow file up and down Center Street, or parked in diagonal lines against the curbing—trucks, mud-incrusted and battered cars of various makes—were manned almost exclusively by Japanese, men or boys. One could plainly hear the murmur of their lingo in the streets. Signs on stores and windows were Japanese in character. In English: The Satsuma Trading Co., Iwata Laundry, and Tokio Express. The old General Store, Fuller's Candy Parlor, the Growers' Hotel, had disappeared. Even the Guadalupe National had been displaced by the Nippon Bank. Inconspicuously set back from the street, shut in between two brick buildings, Bart caught a fleeting glimpse of a weatherbeaten peaked roof, a sagging belfry, and recognized with a pang the little old Catholic Church.

Josh carefully guided the automobile through the congestion of traffic. At the end of Center Street, they came abruptly upon two large buildings facing one another, the High School and Grammar School. It was a few minutes after three, and the boys, girls, and smaller children were pouring out of the doorways, streaming in twos or threes and in companies, down the broad staircases, across the playgrounds, sauntering away in different directions. Three out of four were Japanese—big boys, little boys, girls of every age—all looking ludicrously like Japanese dolls with flat faces, socketless eyes, and straight black hair; throngs, swarms, they seemed in number to Bart. Among them, now and then, he detected a white girl or boy. The children trooped down the steps of the two school buildings, joyfully, scattering to their interests or their homes.

Peggy indeed had a problem, Bart reflected, conscious, in spite of what he considered his broad-mindedness on the subject, of a feeling of race prejudice—children of another nationality and race crowding American classrooms, elbowing American children.

Josh interrupted with:

"No evidence here of birth control, eh? There you have it. This is a rural colony; the Japs need children to grub in the strawberry fields, pick fruit, work in the packing and cutting sheds and in the canning factories. Children here are economic assets. One family Medcraft called to my attention has eighteen children; another, twenty. Most Jap couples have eight to ten. Every child, as soon as it is old enough to work, brings in the nickels and the dimes, so that the youngsters contribute to the general exchequer and go on with their schooling at the same time. They're an amazing people, industrious, hard working, strong on family ties, loyal to one another; you rarely hear of drunkenness or dishonesty among them, and ninety per cent. of them are eager to be Americanized. What are you going to do about it? We may close our ports to them and do so, but you can't prevent men and women who prize offspring from breeding, either because of material interest or from real affection. Our upper classes don't value children; these people do."

The car slowed down, and Josh turned its nose between two chipped and marred brick gateposts. Bart's pulse quickened, his throat closed, his hands fisted themselves.

Now . . . . ! He was coming home!

The old drive, the laurels like giant hedges towering heavenward; another throbbing moment, and the house lay revealed, a shabby, ramshackle, dingy white ranch-house, sprawling between two oaks, absurdly small, insignificant! He had pictured it so differently—palatial, baronial, generous, a Versailles! Yet —it was home, *his* home, always that! . . . . Los Robles! . . . .

His eyes swept the trees, the lawn, the garden—Jane's prize garden. Winter's hand still lay upon it, but even so, he saw it was not the Eden he had been visioning. Trifling, shabby, fusty, the gracious lawn was not more than a sweep of shabby, unkempt turf. His heart cried out. It must all be put back the way it was, somehow, sometime!

The tires scrunched on the driveway, and the car came to a stop with a screech of brake. Bart looked at the worn steps, the old-fashioned glass-paned front door, now with a shirring of net behind it. The veranda, which sagged at one end, was set as in former years with couches and wicker chairs, these of to-day in chintz and gay paint. The higgelty-piggelty confusion of his boyhood days, like the mattress vine, had disappeared, and gone too, he seemed to feel, was the freshness of Jane's touch. Jane, the bride, bent upon infusing lightness and grace into the old home. Shabby, comfortable it looked, but not neglected. He loved every sliver and nail and bolt in the building, every twig and blade and sod in the garden.

A tall girl in a white sailor blouse and blue skirt, a girl with dark, wide eyes like her mother's, and dark hair like his own, came down the steps, demurely, uncertainly, as he opened the car's door and got out; another girl, smaller, darker, with bobbed hair, and long black lashes against her cheeks, shyly lagged behind.

Bart met their glances. . . . . His heart contracted fiercely; he wanted to take them in his arms, strain them to his breast, cry aloud to them and to the world:

"You know me? I'm your father! Your *father!*"

Instead, he put an arm about the shoulders of each, kissed their shy lips, and said, turning from one to another:

"Well—well—well! You're Janey, and you're Margaret. My goodness, how you've grown! You're amazingly like your mother, Jane; and this is my bashful Margaret! 'Member your old dad, Margaret? My dears! I'm *so* glad to see you again! . . . . Well—well—well . . . ."

The house door burst open; there was a brisk purposeful tread upon the veranda. He turned, his heart thumping, fearing, hoping it was Peggy, but it was Jane,—*big* Jane,—strong, large, wide of hip, full breasted.

"Bart!" She kissed him vigorously on either cheek. "Bless your old heart. It's *good* to see you. We were half expecting you in time for lunch."

Josh explained a late start. Jane took him up:

"That's all right—quite all right. Peggy and I didn't know, that was all. We thought you *might* make it. Girls, help your Aunt Lou with her things. Give her your hand there, Margo.

Mercy, children, you're as dumb as colts! . . . . Fine, aren't they, Bart? Precious darlings . . . ."

Another step. Bart wheeled, this time to meet the hazel, gentle eyes of a boy of twelve—freckled, snub-nosed, with the look of an angel—who, with lips half parted in a smile, came and put a soft, friendly hand in his.

A sharp emotion caught at the man's heart; he had to grip tight his teeth to steady himself. He tried to say: "Why, this must be Dick!" but only a harsh breath escaped him. Another effort brought nothing more. Suddenly he needed to sit down. This was going to be harder—harder than he had expected. Keeping fast hold of the boy's hand, he reached for a chair.

In a moment, he was able to smile.

"Well, young man, when last I saw you, you were wearing rompers very successfully."

A fool remark! His heart swelled. He wanted to seize this friendly, smiling boy with the hazel eyes in his arms and hold him to him, fiercely, devouringly.

But now there were other feet, heavy, thumping ones, thundering inside of the house. Two men tumultuously came out upon the veranda in a clatter of sound, two tall men—young men—Vikings—corduroyed, sweatered, with smooth round red necks filling the opened collars of their white shirts. One had a mass of tawny, disheveled hair, was wide-shouldered, bronzed, with strong, muscular forearms and large, tough hands; the other was smaller, hawk-eyed, wiry of stature. Dan and John!

The former strode straight for him, catching him strongly in a large handclasp.

"Gee, I'm glad to see you, Dad. It's been a long time, hasn't it, sir?"

John extended his thin, lean fingers and smiled with his eyes.

Bart could only squeeze their hands. He dared not speak; his vision blurred; he blinked in pain.

His sons!

He held tightly to John, and laid his arm across the boy's shoulder. He needed to hold on to someone. Dan and young Dick were extricating the suitcases from the trunk at the back of the car, Josh supervising: there were those bags and the two inside.

Confusion, milling; Josh, Louise, Jane talking all at once. Dan slid his big body beneath the steering wheel, banged the door, and the car moved off, to be driven to the old barn. Bart remembered Josh performing the same service,—driving his own uncle's vehicle to cover.

From the narrow door of the ranch's office—the cube-like building squatting between the four uprights of the water tank—a figure appeared, waving an arm and a hat.

"Hello there, everybody," it called and came hurrying toward them.

"Hello, Jack!" Louise answered, fluttering a glove.

"Sh-h," cautioned Jane, with a gesture towards the upper floor.

"How is he?" Bart asked, in a low voice.

His sister-in-law gave him a concerned frown and a quick head-shake.

She had changed considerably, this first sweetheart of his. The golden hair was bobbed and curled in flat scallops now, snuggly fitting her head beneath an invisible net; no hint of powder softened the healthy, firm, finely veined cheeks; the mouth was resolute, two square lines marking its corners; her bosom was ample, girth round. A rancher's wife, competent, complacent, bustling. He sensed antagonism.

Jack came up. He reminded Bart sharply of their mother. He, like his wife, had grown stout, but his stoutness verged on obesity. His stomach was large, his face smooth, jowled, and he had the same placid expression that had characterized Mathilda.

"Well—well, Bart, welcome home; fine to see you, fine to have you back. Children looking well, aren't they? All great youngsters. Seen his Reverence? Bad night, last night, Josh; he didn't sleep—hardly a wink. Think he was a good deal upset, knowing Bart was coming. How jew find him?" The question was to Bart.

"Not yet."

"Ah, well, you must go right up."

"Not for a minute or two, please," Jane interposed; "he may be dozing; at any rate, I think I'd better prepare him first."

"How *is* he, Jack?"

"You'd be surprised. Mind's as clear as a bell; loves to talk; talk to anybody who'll listen. Gentle, you know, and all that, but loves to air his views. Grand old man, if there ever was one."

"Boys, take charge of these bags and suitcases, will you? Uncle Josh and Aunt Lou are in the guest room; your father's in the pink room. That's your old one, Bart."

"The little one under the eaves?"

"Well, hardly. That's Dick's, now. No, this is the one you had when you were sick, the one you used to write in. I declare, we're going to put a brass plate on the door, and say 'This is the room in which Bartholomew Carter wrote his first story!' 'Member? You'll find it pretty much the same. The girls've been using it, but we made them vacate when we heard——"

"Oh, a pity! Sorry to put them out! I'd 've slept anywhere."

"Much the best as it is," Jane said, as one settling a dispute. "Do them *good* to give up their comfortable quarters for their father while he's with us. . . . ."

No talk of Peggy. Obviously they were avoiding mention of her.

He sat down. The others chatting, the boys carrying the bags, Janey and Margaret hanging on either side of their Aunt Lou, telling her in excited bursts of a marionette show they were planning to give for the Girl Scouts, disappeared into the house. Jack drew Josh aside to talk with him about the priest.

Bart felt oddly superfluous.

His eyes roamed about the oval apron of lawn, the flower beds, shrubbery, and trees hemming it about. He seemed to see ghosts in the shadows, glimpses of familiar shapes in the odd apparel of bygone years: his father, vest open, held together by his heavy watch chain, limping with his hurried gait —Stephen, hair awry, teeth bad, lumbering lankily after him —Aunt Anna, buxom, noisy, red-lipped—Philo, scowling, glowering, a sneer twisting his mouth—Eva Ann fluttering fairy-like among the hollyhocks and foxgloves—Camilla and Tilly whispering in the moonlight—the old monkey tree with its malevolent branches—Jack and Jane in each other's arms, her green dress, his young eager voice . . . .

Obtruding incongruously, he saw a vision of himself as he was to-day, sitting in the brightly painted, chintzy rocker on the veranda of the house—well dressed, well groomed, a New Yorker, the nationally known writer of popular novels. He glanced at his feet, at his trousers, his hands: well shod, neatly creased, nicely manicured. On the third finger of his left hand was the large scarab ring Mildred had given him.

His son Dan, with long steps, came striding from the direction of the barn. Bart's heart grew big as he watched him coming; the boy was magnificent with his broad chest, big arms, big shoulders, big legs. His tawny hair, thick, curling, clung to his head like a lion's tight mane. He was charmingly unconscious of the beauty of his lusty manhood.

Josh and Jack had gone upstairs to see Father Francis. Bart hooked a chair leg with his foot and drew the seat nearer his own; he and his son would sit a while and chat; he was eager to know the boy. Wondering if he might offer him a cigarette, he felt in his pocket for his case as the lad reached the steps.

"Anything I can do for you, sir?" Dan asked, meeting his smile.

"No-o . . . ." Bart began; "I was just sitting here . . . ."

The boy hesitated deferentially.

"I have to see Uncle Jack about something right away." He nodded, smiled again, and passed inside.

Bart sat on, smoking, flicking the end of his cigarette now and then with the tip of his fourth finger to keep the ashes from falling upon his lap and trousers.

§ 2

It was all so different from what he had expected. The old house, the grounds, all the surroundings seemed worn, faded, absurdly dwarfed. For twenty years Los Robles had meant Paradise to him. Now it was nothing more than a shabby California ranch. Gone were the great cattle ranges over the low, rolling, flat country. Gone were the orchards of five hundred, a thousand acres, the billowing lakes of wheat, the vast domains, the strong men and women, pioneers, wresting wealth from the land, harnessing Nature for their own purposes and those of posterity. Now posterity had arrived, and the struggle seemed piddling, inconsequential. The land was there, the acreage unchanged, but it had been split up into a thousand trifling holdings with owners bickering with each other, absorbed in pettiness, jealousy, and suspicion. There was a real estate project across the road, Orchard Acres, billboards lined the highway; from where he sat, Bart could see one on the knoll above the tops of the laurels; it read: "Red Label Catchup—Best in the World!" A long wailing note of a speeding trolley sounded from across the valley, giving to his reflections, it seemed to him, an appropriate exclamation mark.

Jane came bustling from the house and took the chair he had drawn up for his son.

"Now, Bart, Peggy's waiting for you. She's in the sitting room, and I've shoo-ed everybody away. This has been frightfully hard for her; she's been dreading it. I'm sure you understand. You'll be considerate, Bart; don't expect too much.

"You see, we've been like one large, happy family all these years—and—and it's hard for all of us. I mean . . . . well, your coming. I don't know just how to say what I want, but we're all trying to be guided by that old saint upstairs who won't be with us many more days. He wishes so much to see you and Peggy reconciled before he goes. We all wish it, of course. It's up to Peggy. I don't know how she's going to feel; I fancy she doesn't know herself. I just want you to understand this, that we've been idyllically happy in this old place for ten years; never any friction, always harmony. Jack and I are just as fond of the children as if they were our very own, and Peggy's the dearest, the person closest to me in the world. You'll never know what a wrench it was for me to give her up when you took her away.

"If you'll stop to think a moment, you'll see what your coming here means to us. The children feel it as much as we do. We want to be generous, Bart—as generous as we know how to be. We're all anxious you should feel welcome. I talked to the children, Jack talked to the children, but it was too much to expect Peggy to greet you along with the rest of us. The poor girl's done nothing but cry for the past week! So you *will* be considerate, won't you, Bart—and don't, don't expect too much. I'm sure your only wish is to spare her all you can. She's in a very nervous, high-strung condition. Go to her; she's in the sitting room waiting for you, but she asked me to step out here first and give you this word of warning. . . . ."

Bart listened until the end, then, inclining his head, rose and stepped heavily into the house. In an obscure corner of the half-darkened sitting room, her white figure reclining in a wing chair, a handkerchief at her cheek, he found his wife.

Closing the door behind him, he came toward her.

"Peggy?"

Even from a distance and in the none too certain light, he could see she was trembling. He stopped. A wave of affection surged up in him.

"Peggy?"

Her eyelids fluttered, she raised them, and he caught a glimpse of her dark eyes. Her lips were caught between her teeth in a thin tight line.

"I've come home," he said. She did not speak, but bent her head over the twisted handkerchief in her hands. He sank upon one knee beside her.

"I want you to understand something right away, Peggy. Things like this are hard to say, but I want you to know. There's no one in my life now but you—you and the kids. And all through these years, I've never stopped loving you—never for a moment has anyone ever taken your place in my heart; since the day we pledged ourselves to each other here in this room, you've been first with me. For what unhappiness I've caused you I can only say I'm terribly sorry. I want to make it up to you, if I can, Peggy. My admiration, my respect, my love for you have never wavered for an instant. Ah, Peggy, forgive me, and let's try to make a go of it again. . . . ."

The tears—the clear crystal tears he remembered so well—brimmed over her lashes and dropped upon her cheeks; she mopped them with her handkerchief.

"Won't you . . . . *can't* you forgive me, Peg?"

Her lips and chin were convulsed by a spasm of trembling. She struggled to speak, wrenching at her fiercely clasped hands.

"I'll try," she said upon a sob.

He touched her then, one hand upon an arm, the other at her knee.

"Ah-h, Peggy," he said, in agony. Minutes passed while he waited for some measure of calmness to return to her. When she was quieter he spoke.

"The children are glorious, Peggy. You've done wonders with them. They're magnificent. My dear, no man could be prouder. I love every hair on their heads, Peg. I love every hair of yours."

He reached across her lap and kissed her wet cheek.

"Peg, dear, how can I make it up to you? How can I show you how sorry I am? I'm ready to start all over again. I've cut every tie I have in the world, I've rid myself of every obligation, I'm free—free to give what's left of my life and everything I possess to you and the kids. This may sound awfully smug to you, but what more can I do or say? I haven't the right to expect anything from you; I don't deserve your consideration, but I love you, Peg, and I love our children. Don't turn me down, don't send me away from all I prize in life.

"God, Peggy, when I see those sons and daughters, it brings home to me all I've lost! Ten years of their youth, ten years of enjoying them, helping them, sharing with them the fun of their adolescence, their joys, enthusiasms! It's been murder! . . . .

"Dearest . . . ." He caught her roughly, now, dragging her handkerchief from her eyes, catching her hands in his. "Peggy, darling, do you love me still? Do you love old Bart who took you with him to New York, who did the best he could for you when the babies were coming so fast, who many a time got the meals and washed the dishes, swept and made the beds when you were so sick, who took care of Danny and Johnny and Janey when they were tiny and you too miserable to look after them?"

He forced an arm about her waist. She was racked with sobs.

"You *do* love me, don't you, Peg?"

Her head, with the handkerchief pressed to her eyes, nodded.

He pulled her to him, but she was too devastated by grief to respond. He let his head sink into her lap.

Ah, it was good to be with her again, it was good to bury his face so.

When her breast had ceased to heave, he looked up and took her hands again in both of his, his eyes intent upon her face.

"What would you like me to do, Peggy?"

He had to repeat the question before she would answer; then very low:

"I don't know."

"Do you want me to go away?"

She shook her head.

"Do you want me to stay here with you and the children?"

She gave assent.

"I've come back," he went on, "to do whatever you wish. . . . . Only I want you to *want* me."

She offered nothing, looking past him, her wide dark eyes glittering with tears.

"Do you forgive me?"

"I'll try," she said as before.

"Then—then will you kiss me, Peg?"

She gave herself readily to him; he caught her, kissing her wet cheeks, her lips. His love rose tumultuously; he yearned for her. This was *Peggy* . . . . this was his *wife* . . . . this was *his!*

She shook like a reed in his embrace as he strained her to him, and kissed him as he kissed her. If there was no fervor in her lips, it was not, he knew, because there was no fervor behind them. The ten years rolled themselves up into a scroll and flew away. He and she were as they had always been. He knew his Peggy; her heart was beating in unison with his. She loved him as she had always loved him—she loved him the way he loved her—they two, inseparably man and wife.

He thought of the priest upstairs who had married them.

"Let's go to Father Francis, Peggy—let's go to him now, hand in hand—let's let him see we're friends again; let's let him see what he wants so much to see, so that he can die in peace, knowing that his prayers have been answered."

And so together, with hands clasped, as he had suggested, they went up the steep old staircase with its sharp right-angled turning and softly entered the room where their friend lay waiting patiently for death.

CHAPTER VI

§ 1

"A BETTER name for birth control would be birthless indulgence," Father Francis observed gently, late the next afternoon.

The haggard face was sunk deep in his pillow; the dark eyes shone like brown agate marbles; the thin, wispy white hair in disarray seemed to have been blown about by contrary winds. Bart, his hands linked across his chest, sat slumped in a chair near by. Since Josh and Louise had departed for the city that morning, he had been conscious of feeling strangely desolate. The priest's bedside seemed the only place in the house where he was welcome and at ease.

"Josh tells me you and he don't agree on the subject," he said.

"Our distinguished brother is a very eminent physician and has to deal with our bodies," the priest returned in his feeble voice; "he has no occasion to be concerned with our souls."

"I know," Bart conceded, "but I'd like to hear what you have to say about such cases as Eva Ann's and Aunt Lizzie's."

"I don't condone either imprudence or intemperance. Birth control would not have helped them; abstinence, continence would. Self-control makes for character; self-indulgence for moral decay. You expect your Dan and John and your daughters to practise self-control before they marry, why shouldn't you expect them to do so afterwards?

"We live our lives with a background of eternity, and the formation of character concerns our future as well as our present existence; self-gratification is not the true purpose of life, which finds its fulfillment—don't you think?—in service and sacrifice."

"Granted," Bart agreed, "but you know what Peggy and I faced, you know what our situation was. We practised both discipline and self-restraint; we struggled and denied ourselves to bring five youngsters into the world, and did nothing to stay their coming."

The pale, esthetic features on the pillow moved gently in negation.

"And the time arrived," continued Bart, "when another child would have tipped the balance and spelled ruin for us. I never should have been a successful writer if another baby had come along. Father, you don't know what it means to live in the same house with a woman you love, share the same bedroom with her, touch her, be constantly reminded of sex, and not to be able to possess her."

"My dear boy, nobody maintains that continence is easy," the priest said with a sad smile; "it isn't any easier than living up to other lofty, unselfish ideals. The greatest Teacher and Exemplar of all said very distinctly that the way to them is narrow, steep, and thorny. Continence, when continence is the only way by which a man can protect the health of his wife or keep what children he has in comfortable circumstances, calls for all the manhood in him. That I will admit. It is not easy. It *is* possible. To look upon sex as an overmastering impulse which will brook no control in marriage is to justify prostitution and infidelity——"

"But what about Jerry McGillicuddy?" Bart broke in. "What are you going to do when a wife steadfastly denies herself to her husband?"

"Well, of course, Trudie was wrong, but even when it happens that some psychic harm results from self-control, the individual has to give way to the broader interests of the many.

"Artificial birth control is never justified, and continence calls for self-mastery of a high order; it may and does involve in many cases an unselfishness that borders on the heroic, but should the practice be condoned in rare and perhaps justifiable instances and the wedge of exception be permitted to enter, in the end the very foundations of the home will be endangered. Continence frequently exacts great hardships, but in the long run human welfare is incalculably promoted.

"I tell you, Bart," the gentle voice continued, "there are three elements that go to make up the marriage relationship—passion, love, and parenthood, and it is the last two which ennoble the relationship. Contraceptive devices tend to isolate passion from love and parenthood; they tend to eliminate too the sacred and sacrificial elements which are part of home life and marriage; remove these correctives, and you have only left the gross desire for sex gratification. Intercourse should only be indulged in when procreation is its object. St. Augustine asserts that the use of contraceptives tends to make a prostitute out of the wife and an adulterer out of the husband. Perhaps that's putting it a little strongly, but you can see how some fathers of the Church regarded the matter. No, no, my boy, birth control, which would deny the boon of existence to children——"

"Wait a moment, Father! Are you sure that it is a boon?"

"Assuredly, otherwise you deny Divine will and intent. Such a frustration of Nature defies the Divine Legislator by wantonly defeating His purpose in establishing and sanctifying marriage. There is no moral difference between denying birth to little ones and robbing them of existence after they are born, though you may call one birth control and the other murder. Preventing conception is a breach of natural law, God's law, and is therefore a sin."

"Then the administration of all medicine, efforts to prolong life, stave off death are in defiance of Nature, a breach of natural law, and consequently sin!"

The white hands fluttered on the sheet.

"Josh says the fit must beget more children, and the unfit fewer," the priest said; "I heartily agree with him that the fit ought to multiply, but they won't, and you and I and the eminent doctor know that they won't. No amount of eugenic scolding is going to get them to do it. Birth control is admittedly practised to a large extent by the cultured class; must we let down the bars and permit the *less* cultured to follow their example? We are faced by probable and imminent racial decay both in quality and quantity as our ever decreasing birth rate indicates."

"But don't you think, Father, that the matter should be left to individual conscience, that it would be better for everyone to decide the ethics of the question for him and herself?"

"That is to say, eh? supposing the individual conscience would concern itself about such profound and difficult moral questions—every man should be a law unto himself? I don't think we'd get very far in this world, if that were the case.

"The attitude of the Catholic Church is not a matter of her own legislation, as are, for instance, such disciplinary laws as those of fasting during Lent and of abstaining from meat on Fridays. We have no power in the matter we are discussing. The standard is not merely one of Church law. It is a matter of Divine law over which the Church has no authority except that of promulgating it, and standing by it. Artificial prevention of conception is ever and always gravely sinful, just like adultery."

"Well, well," Bart said, after some moments' reflection, "I won't argue the subject longer with you. You're tiring yourself out."

The sick man's wrinkled lids fluttered open, and a whimsical look came from the brown agate eyes.

"Ah, if I only could—tire myself out!" he said, and smiled.

§ 2

The better part of his days, Bart spent beside the priest, and it was shocking to see him fail so rapidly. Day by day he wasted away, perceptibly growing thinner and weaker. He could no longer indulge in the long talks he loved so well. Bart would sit for hours by his bedside, usually with a book open in his lap, the frail, veined hand in his, while the dying man lay motionless upon the bed, his chin thrust upward, his eyes closed, faintly breathing.

Jane tiptoed into the room, Peggy tiptoed into the room, sometimes one of Bart's daughters would softly enter, shyly embarrassed at her father's pleased smile of welcome. There was nothing to be done; continuing to live was the only discomfort the priest knew. Medcraft would come in the evening between eight and nine to give him an injection of morphine which put him asleep until daybreak, often until mid-morning. The dying man suffered little; he complained not at all. Sometimes he would squeeze Bart's hand, his deeply creased lids would part, there would be a gleam from the bright eyes, and he would whisper approvingly:

"Good man . . . . good man. Good brother. Good Bart."

Once he roused himself to ask:

"You and Peggy all right now?"

"Quite all right," Bart reassured him.

"Boys and girls all right?"

"Entirely so."

"You like 'em, don't you, Bart?"

"Finest youngsters in the world!"

The white head weakly nodded.

"Jack thinks the youngest—that's Dick, isn't it?—ought to become a doctor, follow his uncle's footsteps. Personally, I think the boy has a vocation. Don't let them influence him."

"I shan't."

An interval.

"They're moving away from here soon as I'm gone, eh?"

"Believe so."

"It won't be long now. . . . . Where they going?"

"Jack and Jane have been talking about taking a trip round the world. They're waiting until the ranch is sold."

"I remember. . . . . They want to take young Janey and Margaret with them, put them in a Swiss school for a year. Don't let 'em do it. Keep them with you."

"I hadn't heard anything of that."

The shriveled head nodded again.

"Heard 'em say it one night in here—weeks ago. That boy, Dan, 's going to Stanford?"

"He wants to, if he can get in."

"Good boy—hold on to him."

"I intend to."

"An' be gentle with Peggy. Fine woman, Bart. She's suffered a great deal."

"I'm going to do everything I can."

"Be gentle."

"I promise."

"Good man. She needs to learn compassion, that's all. Be gentle with her."

Bart was on his knees, his lips close to the ear upon the pillow, the frail emaciated hand in his.

"I promise to devote my life to her, Father Francis,—devote what's left of it to her and the children. I've done them a great wrong; I want to make amends if I can. If they'll only *let* me, that's all I ask. You've done everything for me, Father; you brought me back, you've brought us together. You know

I always wanted to come. You've always managed to save me when I got myself into trouble. I owe everything—my life and soul—to you."

"Um-mum,—you owe your soul to God."

"It's been your love and counsel that's led me back to Him. I'll never forget. I'll always be grateful."

He touched the papery, dead white skin on the fleshless forehead with his lips, and the pressure of the hand in his own answered him.

§ 3

They buried Father Francis ten days later. Willfully he seemed to hasten the end; he felt his work was done; he was eager to go. His eyes, whenever he looked at Bart or Peggy and recognized either, seemed clearly to say: "Now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace."

They laid him in the little Catholic cemetery, a mile and a half beyond the outskirts of Carterville, where the willows were just coming into leaf and the cherry trees were in bloom. Many attended the funeral, including a number of fellow priests with whom he had been associated in San Francisco. One of them came down to the chancel rail after the Mass to speak with eloquence and touching simplicity of the beauty of his life. Josh and Louise were there, and Tilly, with her three tall, handsome children, came over from Guadalupe.

Bart walked back to the house alone from the grave. He told Jane and Peggy he wanted to cross the orchards, to climb the knoll where the catchup sign stood for a look at the view. But he took only a few steps at first to separate himself from the sober company which slowly turned from the open grave and made its way toward the line of automobiles waiting on the highway. Behind a granite shaft Bart hid, and sat down upon a bit of coping which edged a plot, leaning his back against a cherry tree whose white blossoms now and then sifted gently to the ground about his feet. He wanted to be alone; he wanted to think.

The day spread itself about and above him graciously; there was sweet spring sunshine in the March morning, fleecy clouds in the sky, birds twittering and chirping in the budding shrubbery, a new green in the grass, and a new freshness in the world.

But there was neither greenness nor freshness in Bart's heart.

"The travesty is over," he thought; "I need pretend no longer."

For during the last weeks and days of Father Francis' illness, Bart had known he was acting a lie. Smiling, he had patted and squeezed the old man's hand, assuring him "all was right" between Peggy and himself, when he had known—none so well as himself,—it was not so.

Almost from the beginning of his return, he had sensed something was wrong. It had come to him gradually, painfully what it was: he was *superfluous*,—he was *not needed!*

It had not taken him many days to analyze the attitude of his wife, Jane, and Jack and to understand it. What baffled him at first had been the certainty that Peggy still loved him. Yet he saw clearly his presence troubled her. She had been afraid of something. She shunned contact with him, avoided conversations, escaping whenever she might be left alone with him. He had been unable to fathom it.

He heard her crying bitterly once, and Jane's firm, resolute voice comforting her.

Along with his wife's reticence and dread of him, he came gradually to recognize Jack and Jane's hostility. That might be too strong a word; resentment expressed it better. They *resented* his presence, though their manner was always interested, friendly, even affectionate. Perhaps they did not understand themselves. Bart—writer that he was—did. They resented his claim upon his own children; they resented his hold upon his sons' and daughters' affection; they resented being displaced.

Before the very first day of his return had drawn to a close, it had become apparent to Bart that Jane had reëstablished her complete domination over his wife. Peggy, the talkative, self-reliant, courageous, indomitable, had become submissive, uncertain of her own mind, subdued, dependent. Jane controlled and managed her, and through her the children, just as all her married life she had controlled and managed her husband, and through him Los Robles. The boys and girls turned to Peggy for tenderness and mothering, but it was Jane who corrected their manners, decided what they might and might not do, ordered their behavior.

It was Jane, too, who had decreed, upon Bart's arrival, that he was to occupy the room with the pink cross-barred muslin curtains, and that Peggy should remain in the room where she was. Subtilely, effectively she had managed it, and subtilely, effectively she saw to it that the arrangement was not disturbed.

Jack was like putty in his wife's hands. Bart's children filled his life, he loved them, his thwarted, parental interest found fine satisfaction in their filial devotion, but just as easily he would have been indifferent to them, or actually disliked them had Jane so wished it.

It was as clear as day to Bart how it all had come about. Jane, in the last analysis, was a stupid, unimaginative woman. She had been touched by Father Francis' admonitions, her conscience had been aroused, she had recognized it as her duty to influence her sister to make peace with Bart. Having done that, she felt she had done all she was called upon to do; so much—yes, but no more.

Friendly, Peggy might be with Bart, but not to the extent of supplanting Jane, or taking the children, rightfully his, away from her. So deftly, consummately, she had planted the fear in her sister's heart that he was certain to rob her, their mother, of the children; he would alienate their affections, take them, now that they were grown, away from her arms.

A hundred speeches, a hundred incidents betrayed Jane's hand. They would have impressed Bart as tragically pathetic, if he had not felt them unfair and cruel.

One evening, at the table, he had been telling his interested boys about the *Vivace,* her rig and gas engine, and had described some of the trips he had made in her to Trapini and Tunis. Jane suddenly interrupted him.

"And now, I suppose, the famous author will be taking his sons and daughters on yachting trips to Paris and London! I guess, children, you won't have much use for the old folks at home when your father decides to show you the world."

Again, in Peggy's hearing, she had said:

"Dan will need some sort of a car when he's at Stanford, and I thought maybe the little old Ford might do, but now that his father is here, money doesn't matter, and I dare say he'll be getting him a Hup or a Chrysler."

"Surely," Bart had agreed innocently.

"Oh maybe a Cadillac or a Lincoln," Jane had suggested and he knew she had trapped him.

Whenever Dan or John or young Dick forgot their shyness and awe of him and were asking questions or listening to him with unconscious interest, Bart had caught a look of fear in Peggy's eyes.

But far more than Peggy's distrust, was his children's attitude which stabbed him to the quick—the attitude which made Dan or John turn to Jack with: "Say, Nunk, c'n we go to Guadalupe to-night to a basketball meet?" or "Nunk, c'n we have four bits for the movies?" "Nunk, c'n we borrow the Buick Sunday?"—the attitude which made Janey or Margaret leave her place at the table and go around to where Jack was sitting at the head of it, shyly climb into his lap, slipping a thin, bare arm about his neck—the attitude which made Dick instinctively bring to Jack a badly mashed finger.

They did not need him, these children of his. He had lost them.

One morning, Jack inadvertently mentioned the Palo Alto house, spoke of it as if he and Jane expected to reside in it. Jane, with an obvious change of subject, had hurried to end the uncomfortable silence.

The atmosphere in and about Los Robles was charged with unspoken thoughts, with unvoiced references to the future. There was no longer any question about the sale of the ranch; Bart was aware that several purchasers were willing to meet Jack's price and were waiting for him to give the word as to which should have it; but there were no allusions to a trip abroad, no word of Europe or the *Adriatic*. Neither was there any talk of Peggy and the children moving away as soon as the schools were closed or looking for a house near Stanford University. Mention of the future was taboo in Bart's presence. Even his children were careful to give him no hint of the plans. Had they been coached?

"Ah, they're all waiting—waiting for me to go," Bart said miserably.

He pulled out of his pocket a letter he had received from Mildred a week ago, spreading its creased pages upon his knee. With its first closely written sheets of self-abnegation, reproach, and underscored assertions he was familiar. He turned these over to find ones toward the end whose words left a searing imprint on his heart.

> "You think you can go back [the letter said]; you think you can pick up the broken threads and go on, resuming your old relations with Peggy and your children just as if there had never been ten years of success, fame, national renown, just as if there had never been ten years of association with writers, poets, editors, intellectuals, just as if you had never been entertained at the Savage Club in London, or seen Paris and Berlin, or known Taormina in the spring with me!
>
> "Bart, Bart, it can't be done. You can't go back. You've outgrown all that, you've outgrown little minds with little horizons and little ambitions. Try it, my dear, try it for three months, or six, or a year. Sooner or later you'll find out the truth of what I'm writing you. California? Carterville? Ha! I see you! Chatting about the crops with farmers, discussing the weather, trying to satisfy your mind with local news and local gossip, trying—God help me, Bart, I'm crying for you as I write—to meet your wife on any common ground of interest, to find in your children the companionship I know so well you crave! I repeat, my dear, it can't be done. You are doomed to disappointment and rebuff—and when you discover you are chasing an *ignis fatuus,* and that your doll is stuffed with sawdust, and your heart is broken, and you're sick and lonely, and your work is not going well, and you begin to wonder why you ever did it, remember you'll find me waiting for you on the shores of the Bay of Biscay in the little Spanish monastery hanging over the cliffs.
>
> "Eunice is going with me. We'll try it alone for a couple of months, and then in the summer the Ryans have promised to join us, but they all understand—every one of them—that out they go on a week's notice the minute I get your cablegram you are on the way, for I know you'll be sending it, Bart dearest, I know it will be on its way before the spring is over, know it just as surely as I know that I'll be waiting for you with a heart overflowing with a love that's

never faltered, never deviated in its loyalty and devotion to you since the day I rented you my little flat on East Seventy-sixth Street!"

He folded the pages carefully, creased them again in their former creases, then slowly and deliberately tore them into small pieces, to let them drift from his fingers like the leaves of the white blossoms which eddied softly to the ground around him.

"Never that," he said aloud; "never that."

He rose, looked up at the sky, looked down at the tufted sward at his feet, at the distant group of grave diggers tamping down the fresh soil they had unearthed, and meditating, followed the winding path that meandered past other graves, past weather-stained tombstones, to the quaint old-fashioned wooden arch which spanned the cemetery's entrance, and so on homeward along the paved and neatly guttered highway.

§ 4

The boys had had time to doff their sober Sunday attire and don once more their easy corduroys. They lay sprawled on the lawn now, heads close together, murmuring; in the canvas-covered swing couch hard by the girls bent over their sewing; Louise was packing the Doctor's things and her own in the guest room upstairs for a prompt departure after luncheon; Jane, in the kitchen, was superintending the meal to which two priests, friends of Father Francis, had been persuaded to stay; Jack, with these visitors in tow, was showing them the garden; Josh, comfortably settled on the sitting-room couch, was reading a newspaper.

Slipping upstairs, Bart knocked on Peggy's door. The look of alarm in her eyes as he came in and shut it after him was pitiful. She stood backed against the dressing table, her hands at her breast.

"Don't be afraid, Peg; I want to talk to you for a minute or two; it's hard to find a time when we're ever alone. There's always someone hanging about, either by accident or design.

"I don't know about that last, but it's come pretty straight to me that I'm not wanted round here. Oh . . . ."

He was going to say he understood the reasons, and blamed nobody, but a spasm suddenly closed his throat. Resting a hand on the window curtain, he looked out on the lawn and the garden. John and Dick were tumbling over one another on the grass, Dan closely watching; Bart could just see the edges of the girls' white dresses in the swing couch.

He faced his wife.

"I'm going up with Josh and Louise this afternoon; I'll drive back to the city with them. At luncheon, I'm going to tell Jack and Jane business is taking me off, and I'll return in a day or two. After I'm gone, you can tell them the truth—and the kids too, if you like. . . . . I'm not coming back.

"Oh, Peg, I don't want to become sentimental or sloppy about this; I want to spare you all I can; I want to spare them . . . .

"There's no use in hashing things over. I've lost you; I've lost the children. I don't deserve either of you. There isn't anybody to blame but me. It isn't fair to expect you to make a place for me in your life after ten years. I say again, there's nobody to blame but myself.

"Peg, I might lie to you; I might tell you that it really *was* business that took me away, or that this country life was too narrow and dull for me; I might say I couldn't work here and that I had to get on with my novel; but I want to be honest with you, tell you the truth. I'm going because I know you're not ready to have me back yet. Jack and Jane have taken my place, and in fairness to them, I must say they fill it adequately. It isn't right for me to kick them out, tell them now that I've come home they must hand over the reins to me."

He passed a hand that shook a little over his face.

"I could put up a fight for my children, I suppose. I could insist upon my rights as a husband and a father in my own family and send Jack and Jane to the right-about. But I don't want to do that, Peg. I don't want to do that, because I love you, and when you learn to love me enough to want me back, when you need me and come to the conclusion you can't get along without me, you have only to send word. I'll keep in touch with Josh; he'll know where a cable will reach me, and I'll come to you like a homing pigeon from the ends of the earth.

"There's no sense in my making a dramatic departure after lunch. You can tell Jack and Jane the truth later . . . . I'd—I'd like Dan to know the facts. He's old enough to understand. I'd like you to tell him in your own way, but if you feel you'd rather not, why, that's all right with me.

"I don't know just where I'll go. I thought maybe I'd chase after old Gill. He's over in Germany some place, but I think I can find him. Alice's sick in Biarritz, and Gill can't stand the place. He wrote me he was going to wander off by himself; I've had several letters from him. He needs me, and I think we'll get along all right together, because, you see we've both . . . . sort of . . . . lost our children. . . . .

"Oh, Peg . . . . Peg . . . ."

He slumped down in a chair and covered his face with his hands.

"Don't let this be the end," he said, through shut fingers. "I'm going on hoping you'll send for me——"

Choking stopped him, and for a long minute he remained bowed as he was, forcing himself to composure. He rose at last, wiping the wet from his eyes with rough finger tips. She had not moved. She stood resting against the dressing table, either hand clutching its edge, her face drenched with tears.

"Good-bye," he said, and came toward her. She let him put his arms about her and press her head against his shoulder. Then abruptly the pent-up storm within her broke. Embracing her, he kissed the top of her head again and again, while his own tears salted his mouth.

"Good-bye," he said once more. "I'll be waiting for you to send word. . . . . Whenever you want . . . . I'll come. . . . ."

He drew deeply of the fragrance he loved so well in her hair, his lips finding its softness lovingly, tenderly, for the last time. He turned to go, but she clung to him, convulsed by grief. Blinded himself, he sought her hands to loosen them, whispering in agony:

"'Bye, darling; I'll come back."

Still she held him, gripping his coat.

"Dearest . . . . don't you want me to go?"

Her head shook in a fresh outburst.

"I'll come back," he repeated.

Again her head rocked against his shoulder.

"But, dearest . . . ."

He raised his eyes to the ceiling hopelessly.

"I must," he groaned, "I *must* go."

A half-smothered whimper from the lips against his breast: "Not—not without me, B-Bart . . . ."

He wrenched her from him, held her at arms' length, searching her quivering, wet face.

"You mean . . . .?"

Gulping, he tried again.

"You mean you'll go *with* me?"

Her answer was in her eyes.

"Or let me stay here?"

She nodded.

"With you and the children?"

Another nod.

"You really want me to stay? . . . . Peg, you *really* want me to stay?"

"So long . . . . so long 's you'll never leave us, Bart."

With a savage cry, he swept her into his arms, holding her close, close against his heart.

"You . . . . you muggins!" he sobbed.

THE END

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A novel of Birth Control

Colonel dan carter belonged to the soil. He piled up rich California acres of ranchland, grain fields and orchards. He was the dictator of his nine sturdy children, his brothers, and his brothers' families, the Carters of Carterville.

But not all the women of the family had the stamina of Matty, the matriarch.

Aunt Lizzie died with a feeble protest after bearing six weakly children in quick succession, and Eva Anne's roving Italian husband left her, crushed body and mind, with twelve undernourished babies.

To Bart and Peggy life was to be different. With youth and love and courage they came to New York. Bart was to write famous novels and Peggy to take care of him. There was no room in their little apartment for babies and no money in the exchequer. But the first baby came and then four others in a disorderly cramped suburban house, for Peggy's religion taught her to believe that any means of contraception were wrong. The debts piled up, the novel faded farther and farther into the future. What was to become of their fine young love that had started out so bravely.